



Children in Detention

After expressing concern about the welfare of children being held by the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, PETER WILLIAMSON was invited by friends of detainees to the Villawood Detention Centre.

Afnan Al Abadey is seven years old. She attends second grade at a school down the road from where she lives in Sydney's western suburbs. When I first met Afnan, she had been at her new school for just a few weeks.

Afnan has made one school friend so far, and hopes to make many more. Every morning two men drop her at school, and at 3pm they pick her up. She must not be late, and must go straight back home. She will not be able to visit her friend's house, or play with others after school. If a friend should want to visit her, she would have to go through the elaborate procedure of gaining access to the Villawood

Detention Centre.

Weekends for Afnan are spent behind the razor wire of a perimeter fence encircling the area in which she can play. She has been incarcerated for half her life. She has no memory of her earlier life outside a razor wire fence. Unfortunately, those times were none too happy, either, as her parents were fleeing persecution in Iraq.

Afnan's older brothers have also recently been allowed to go to school. Their flight and subsequent detention has cost them years in lost schooling – a loss they will never make up. Nevertheless, a family friend says the lines of worry and anger on one brother's face have

disappeared since recently being allowed five days a week to pass through the detention centre's gates and go to school like every Australian child his age. Unlike every Australian child, he now looks forward to Mondays when he can be free, and hates the boredom of the weekends behind the wires.

To be a child in an Australian detention centre is to live a life so abnormal that one can only speculate on the psychological consequences. Childhood, anywhere in the world, ought to be a time free of cares and full of finding one's place in the world. It is a time of expanding boundaries, but this cannot be done if one's boundaries are

those of what is effectively a concentration camp.

While Afnan is growing up in detention, Veronika has been detained less than a month when we meet. She is still too bewildered at what has happened to her for me to discern the emotional impact of her incarceration. She is held in Villawood with her younger sister and her parents who have applied for asylum in Australia.

Vlastimil, her father, tells me the story of how the family was hauled in by the immigration officials when he went to visit DIMIA to notify them of a change of address. He was arrested on the spot as an illegal immigrant. He protested that he was waiting the outcome of the application for asylum, but the officials said that they had rejected his family's application and that the family had failed to respond to their notices requiring them to contact DIMIA and leave Australia.

With the whole family in detention with her mother and her sister, they had to ask friends to empty their rented house and store their possessions. The family car was left in a car park at Parliament House in Canberra, where Veronika's mother was making appeals to politicians to intervene in their case. She was arrested in Canberra and the car remained where she had left it.

While DIMIA thought of Vlastimil as "on the run", he had, in fact, rented a house, started a business, put his children into school, paid his taxes and embarked on becoming Australian. Numerous government agencies had his address

and, in any case, on each change of address he had notified DIMIA of the new one.

Veronika was brought into detention a month later. She had a part-time job and was never able to resign. Her year 10 "leaving" exams were just months away, and she asked permission to continue attending school. This was refused. She then asked to have her books brought to her so that she could continue studying in the detention centre. This was also refused. She was told she would not be allowed to write exams at all.

Veronika had a boyfriend, but after one visit to her in Villawood, he dumped her and ceased contact. A few friends visited her, but it was a long way to travel and they had exams coming up.

A few days before we first met, the family was called to an office inside the detention centre, where they were grabbed by security guards, handcuffed and bundled into cars and taken to Sydney Airport. They were dragged onto a plane, literally kicking and screaming, punched and ordered to "shut up". Not surprisingly, the airline refused to carry them.

Although the Bilsky's appeals to the Australian courts were not complete, the DIMIA sought to deport them, using force and violence. The family showed me scratches and bruises on their bodies, and spoke of their disbelief that they could be treated in such way in Australia, the country which was their adopted

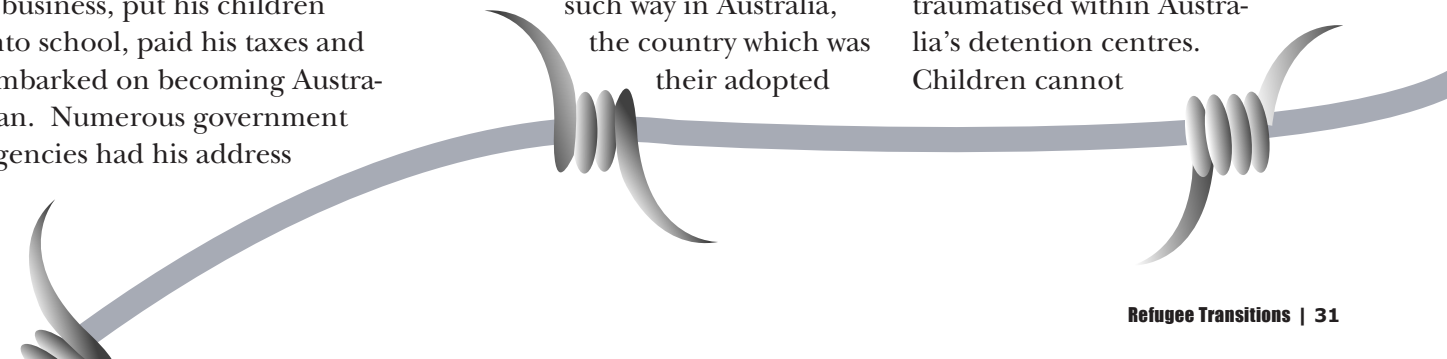
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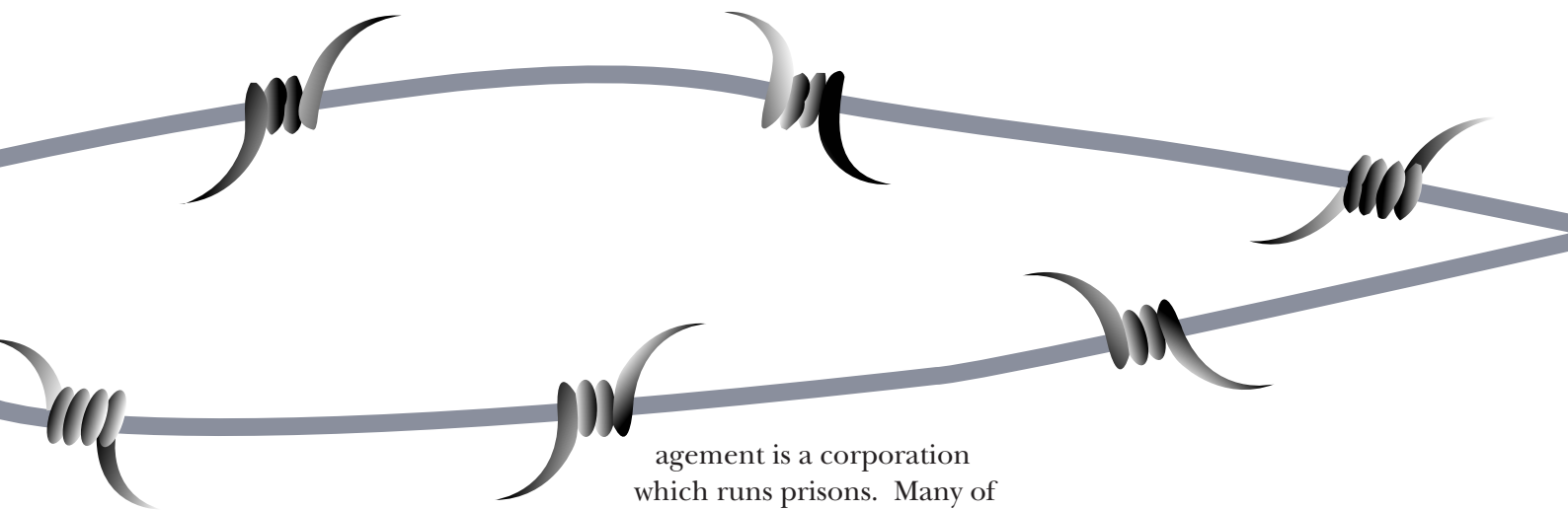
I asked Veronika about her situation. She spoke of her helplessness and her frustration at being unable to complete the last months of the school year and write her leaving exams. Nevertheless, she was confident that it would soon be sorted out and that they could not be deported because the DIMIA accepted that their case was still before an Australian court. She was concerned that if they were ever deported, her younger sister would struggle in the Czech Republic because she could not speak Czech. She had had all of her education in Australia.

Veronika wrote about how she felt about detention, and handed me a handwritten page on our next meeting (see box). I promised to visit again, soon.

The long-term incarceration of asylum-seekers is detrimental and sometimes disastrous for their psychological health. The incarceration of children in such circumstances exceeds all bounds of acceptable treatment and the spirit of the Refugee Convention. It is causing suffering and psychological trauma and it is a national disgrace.

Refugee children are owed a heightened degree of care. Many have suffered hardship and trauma as a result of war, persecution and flight, and still more, after witnessing suicides, riots, violence towards detainees, and people suffering emotional breakdowns, have been traumatised within Australia's detention centres. Children cannot





distinguish between detention and imprisonment for reasons of criminality. They experience detention centres as prison, and their treatment by uniformed guards, lack of privacy, and regimented lives in an institutional environment, all contribute to the perception of imprisonment.

Some children have complained of being unable to sleep because of continual checks by guards who shine torches into their faces. They sleep many to a room, with some of the younger children sometimes unable to sleep because the older children keep them awake late into the night. Depression, suicidal thoughts and despair are all exacerbated by incarcerating already vulnerable people.

Minister Ruddock has said that detention serves as a deterrent to other asylum seekers who seek to enter Australia without the required papers. Intentionally inflicted psychological pain or suffering on any person for such purposes as coercing third person would contravene the UN Convention against Torture. The routine detention of children is also considered by many to be a violation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The administration of Australia's refugee detention centres does nothing to dispel the perception of imprisonment. Australian Correctional Man-

agement is a corporation which runs prisons. Many of the staff were recruited from the prison system. Thus it can hardly be expected that they would treat asylum-seekers much differently from prisoners.

For children the situation is worse. Children are imprisoned in only the most extreme circumstances, usually after extensive efforts to find alternatives within the juvenile justice system. Refugee children, however, are treated much as the most difficult of child offenders, yet they are not there as the result of any offence.

When I visited Villawood two weeks later the guards at the reception desk told me that Veronika was no longer there. I asked where she was and they said that they did not know. I asked what had happened to her and, again, they did not know. The entire Bilsky family was gone.

I have since found out that that after several attempts to deport them, Veronika and her family were drugged and bound and put onto a military aircraft out of Australia. They were taken to Malaysia and sent on a commercial flight via Russia to the Czech Republic. I once asked Vlastimil what he would do if they were deported, and he said that he would have no choice but to flee the Czech Republic again, but he had no idea where he would seek asylum for his family.

Veronika Bilaska

I have been in detention now for about a month and they have attempted to deport me twice. When I was outside, everyday I would wake up and go to school and I believed I was living an average life, but now that they have put me in detention it's all changed. Before, I would see my friends every day; we would talk, we'd go shopping, watching movies – do things any normal teenager would. Now, I'll see my friends once a week if I'm lucky. I can't go shopping or watch movies.

I just feel like it's all a dream, a nightmare which just won't end and I keep feeling like I am being punished for wanting to be an Australian. All I want is my life back to study and be normal. I have been here for seven years and I have a younger sister who's just twelve years old.

The first night they took us here I was so scared and upset we were all wondering what was going to happen next. I have never heard of this place before, so being here is quite scary. The fence and wires are very depressing. Even though in time you forget about them, you know they are all around you keeping you a prisoner.