



Families in Cultural Transition

For newly arrived refugees making connections with mainstream Australia is fraught with difficulties. Adjusting to a new culture is challenging at the best of times, but if you are also dealing with the emotional, social and physical effects of persecution, you may be starting a new life with a significant handicap.

The recent expansion of STARTTS' Families in Cultural Transition (FICT) program is proving a great success in introducing recent arrivals to their new culture and helping them make the links they need to successfully settle here.

The FICT program is a 10-week series of workshops designed to help newly arrived refugees learn about Australia, its culture and systems, while also addressing some of the potential effects of traumatic experiences.

As Naw Eh and her daughter Moe Moe, two of STARTTS' newest FICT facilitators from the Karen ethnic group of Burma, say: "FICT has opened the eyes of our community. Before we felt like we were not connected with Australian culture, just with the Karen community," Moe Moe said.

"Now we know other organisations and other Australians and feel more connected. When we first came we didn't know about STARTTS, how good they are with torture and trauma [victims] and have lots of activities and options to help us," she said. "Now we know not only about STARTTS but lots of other organisations through preparation and STARTTS' referral," said Naw Eh.

Participants are given the opportunity to discuss their life prior to arriving in Australia and how those experiences may be affecting their life now as well as the cultural differences between their birth country and their new land.

Topics covered in the 10 weeks include the concept of the welfare state, equality, multiculturalism, democracy, money and budgeting, grief and trauma, communication and conflict in families, children and parenting, gender, domestic violence, youth, employment, health and recreation.

Each FICT group is led by people from the same ethnic background as the participants and from that same culture, who are trained by STARTTS. Sometimes groups are separated along gender lines and sometimes they are mixed, depending on the needs of the participants.

STARTTS is now holding FICT groups for the Southern Sudanese, Mandaean, Karen, Sierra Leone and Tibetan communities.

More groups are planned for the near future.

George Mansaray, who arrived in Australia less than one year ago, is the first facilitator from the Sierra Leone community. He said he wished FICT had been available when he first arrived in Australia.

"Before you come to Australia there's a massive-scale orientation for three or four days. What you're supposed to do, what money is, etcetera. Really, it's not enough. You see pictures, nice houses, you see plastic money," George said.

"All of those things are in the back of your mind. You think you are going to heaven. On arrival and with less pressure on you, it's the honeymoon period."

"After that the honeymoon period is gone. You want to study, need a job, bills are coming in and you need to pay the rent. You're into another phase," he says.

"That's what we're facilitating in the FICT sessions for new arrivals. I didn't have that opportunity to be taught. Even when I was here for the first few months someone would have to come with me. I didn't know how to look up a street directory." "What we are trying to do is help people become independent, do things on their own, empower them," he said.

Reflecting on the modules that deal with past experiences of torture and trauma George believes they had a great impact on both, himself and the group.

"The module where people disclose some of their experiences was really upsetting. But it was helpful for the group to know the different stages refugees go through, the things that happen," he says.

"You know you don't have to be part of it [violence and torture], but as a witness it can have an impact on you ... It was good to be able to talk about what happens and to know it is happening to other refugees too," he stated. ■

Book Review

The Road Map to Nowhere – Israel/Palestine since 2003

Tanya Reinhart

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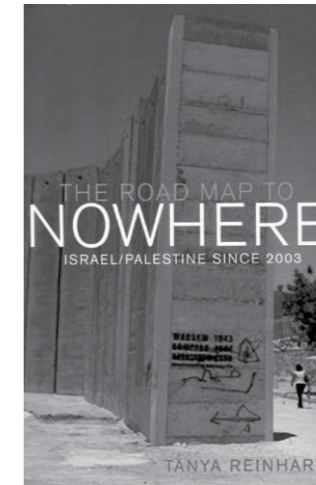
Reviewed by Vincent Sicari

My father was captured by the Germans on the Greek Island of Kephallonia. He endured three years of brutal treatment, including shipwreck, digging trenches for his captors at the Russian front and imprisonment in various labour camps in Siberia and the Soviet south.

The second world war did not invent torture, it did not invent mass killings and brutal arbitrary death. But my reading of the second world war in search of the individual who was to become my father led me to one inescapable truth: the inhumanity of man to his fellow man can have no limits. How can one begin to understand the inhumanity of the death camps – the industrialisation of death?

The war killed in excess of twenty million Russians, 9 million Germans, six million Poles, six million Jews..... But it was the killing of the Jews which struck me with uncomprehending wonder. How could an advanced, civilized society such as Germany was before the War investigate, research, plan and execute such a barbarous crime? In reading this story I realised we are all victims, we are all Jews. The killing of my neighbour is the death of me.

It is this thinking that motivates Tanya Reinhart, whom I had the privilege to hear on her visit to Sydney last year. Tanya is a professor of linguistics at Tel Aviv University. She is a Jew living in Israel, an Israel that, in her view, is betraying her deepest principles. Her principles of being humane to your enemy, of understanding your neighbour's needs, of being quite simply human. In her extraordinary book, *The Road Map to Nowhere*, Ms Reinhart explores the history of the occupation of Palestine since 2003, the policy of containment of the Palestinian people, of unilateral disengagement, of brutal repression and bloody reprisal, of the descent into nihilistic despair.



Ms Reinhart will be accused by some of distorting the truth, of identifying too closely with the enemy, but in my estimation she is closer to the answer than all of the protagonists she describes. From Ehud Barak to Ariel Sharon and his hapless successor, Ehud Olmert the policies pursued by Israel have led to massive hardships for the Palestinian people – our neighbours. If we are Jews, the Palestinians are our neighbours. Ms Reinhart is nothing if not direct. She does not shrink from calling things by their name: she accuses Sharon of "ethnic cleansing".

Since 2002, "Sharon started a massive project of ethnic cleansing in the areas of the West Bank bordering Israel. His wall project robs the land farmed by the Palestinian villages in these areas, imprisons whole towns and leaves their residents with little means of sustenance." She further claims that the Gaza Strip "remains a big prison, completely sealed off from the outside world, nearing starvation and terrorized from land, sea and air by the Israeli army".

Tanya Reinhart's critique of Israeli policy is as powerful as it is direct. Her insight into the complex forces at play in the cauldron of the middle-east with the continuing crisis in the relationship of Israeli and Palestinian deserves our attention.

Is the answer brutish force? After a generation or more of fighting it is questionable that force is the answer. As Mr Bush, Mr Sharon's most loyal backer, has learned to his detriment in the deserts of Iraq, it is only through dialogue that an answer that suits all contenders in the crucible of Israel/Palestine can be reached.

We are all Israelis/Palestinians. We are all survivors of that holocaust. We are all my father's children.

