



Here, There, and Elsewhere Refugee Families in Milwaukee

A photo-documentary

John Ruebartsch & Sally Kuzma

Here, There, and Elsewhere

Refugee Families in Milwaukee

Milwaukee has a long history as a city shaped by immigrants; waves of diverse Europeans fleeing poverty and oppression once made it the most “foreign” city in America, notes historian John Gurda. In the last 30 years, it has become home to people fleeing violence in places like Southeast Asia and Africa. *Here, There, and Elsewhere* looks at the experiences of these newer arrivals as they rebuild their lives and communities and become part of 21st century Milwaukee.

Those who share their stories here include: a Hmong woman who farms 22 acres in Oak Creek; two Somali Bantu sisters, both single mothers juggling work and family; a Lao pastor and his congregation; a former shopkeeper from Sudan; a man who left Viet Nam to join his brothers in the US; a Muslim family from Burma embedded in a rich social network; a Burundian native making a home here after 35 years in a refugee camp; Somali-American girls preparing to go to Africa for the summer. Events from their wider communities are also pictured – a Ramadan service; the commemoration of a political uprising; a new community association in the making; a baptism in a church that embraces people of the African diaspora past and present.

The arrival of newcomers often raises questions for others - *Where do they come from? Why are they here? How do they live? How does their presence here change this place?* To open up these questions and see our common humanity amidst cultural differences is the challenge of this work.

Sally Kuzma
Milwaukee WI, 2010

Cover image

John Ruebartsch
Adey's daughter Muslimo reading, 2010
Giclee on rag paper
24”w x 16”h



John Ruebartsch
Yarey, son Omar with cat, and a neighbor outside her southside apartment, 2010
Giclee on rag paper
24" w x 16"h

Family Portrait: New Milwaukee Immigrants

Jasmine Alinder

Family members assemble, line up in rows and smile; friends appear candid during celebrations; individuals reveal private moments in their homes; groups sit at meetings and gather in church. The photographs of the Milwaukee refugee project represent some of the newest members of the city and describe the relationships and networks of community that they have established despite cultural, social, economic, and linguistic barriers. The photographs honor and respect subjects' claims to self-presentation and reflect the project creators' desires to tell the stories of these people in a manner that portrays their humanity and does not exploit their differences.

The photographer, John Ruebartsch, is himself an immigrant. His parents, who had been forced to leave their homes in Silesia, met as refugees in West Germany. John came to the United States when he was five years old, and moved to Milwaukee from California as a young man. He earned an MSW in social work at UWM before devoting himself full time to photography. The Milwaukee Refugee project brings



John Ruebartsch
Max and Ma Ra Sul Bi with their four children at home, 2010
Giclee on rag paper
24" w x 16"h

together his interests in photographic documentation, and the formal concerns of light, composition, and rich color, with his desire to examine social issues and his own status as a naturalized citizen of the United States.

John began work on this project without his camera. He started by volunteering at the International Learning Center as a tutor to get to know some of the families and begin to establish a relationship with them. After Sally Kuzma sent out the call for participants in the project, they set up appointments for interviews and photographs. When Sally and John made follow up visits, they would bring examples of the earlier work so that the photographic subjects could feel more involved in the process and see copies of the photographs that had been made. The photograph of Tam standing over the shoulder of her father Thuc reveals the endearing gaze of this young girl and her pose expresses a closeness with her father, who is examining John's photographs from an earlier visit.

Many of the photographs draw on representational strategies common in formal portraits. The photograph of Yarey in her bedroom utilizes a low vantage point, which both lends a monumental quality to the subject and allows the photographer to include the elaborate decorations in her bedroom.



John Ruebartsch
Thuc and his daughter Tam, 2010
Giclee on rag paper
24" w x 16"h



John Ruebartsch
Yarey's room, 2010
Giclee on rag paper
16"w x 24"h

Yarey gestures to the bedspread with the hand used to make it. Her facial expression is confident and the light coming through a window and reflected in the mirror illuminates the left side of her face with a warm glow. The repetitions of color and pattern on the bed, wall, and even ceiling indicate Yarey's meticulous attention to the decorative scheme of her private space, and show how she has used her cultural sensibilities to remake this new place into her home. This assertion of agency is reiterated in the photograph of Yarey at work helping to build the home that will be hers when it is completed.

These photographs resonate with broader themes in the histories of art and photography. Lewis Hine, who was born in Wisconsin, used photography to expose relevant social issues and focused his lens during the early twentieth century on newly arrived immigrants at Ellis Island. He used the camera to evoke humanity in people that were often discriminated against because of their fledging status and assumptions of racial inferiority. Political debate over immigration rights continues to rage a century later, and the Milwaukee refugee project is meant to move beyond myopic, often racist, misunderstandings of those who are starting new lives here in the United States, usually out of economic, political, or religious necessity. The photograph of Said with his two friends coupled with his interview reveal the harsh reality of a young man who wasn't able to finish high school and now works full time to support his mother and sister, but also his vivid dream to escape meat packing and become a filmmaker. The portrait of Said's half-sister Muslimo in her apartment reading evokes earlier paintings by artists such as Mary Cassatt that depict women engaged in internal, intellectual activity. The iconography of the photograph reveals an overlay of patterns from the floral motif in the wall hanging behind her to the bubble pattern of her skirt and the familiar stars and stripes in her head covering. As a teenager she balances her conflicting desires to fit into larger groups through the vampire novel she reads and the flag motif of her scarf with her need to establish her own identity as an individual.

Subjects assert a high degree of self-fashioning throughout the work. The photograph of the group of five young Burmese men at a New Year celebration, in baseball caps slightly askew, gold chains, and baggy hoodies, demonstrate their camaraderie and connection through an American urban sartorial style. In another photograph, a young bride and groom sit and gaze at each other surrounded by siblings, three of whom look straight into the camera's lens with gentle smiles. The rich hues of the print lead the eye from the band of burgundy along the back wall to the pink flowers that flank the couch, the hennaed fingers of the groom, the red lips of the sisters, and the cherry red of the coke can in the extreme foreground.

Other photographs reveal couples who have long been married and have weathered the challenges of immigration together, sometimes with children. The groom's aunt, Ma Ra Sol Bi and her husband Max met and married in Bangkok after leaving Burma, and under threat of harassment by Thai police became

refugees who resettled in the United States two years ago. Awaiting refugee status, Beshir and his wife Khadija stand tall in their living room and look directly into the camera's lens. Their television, tuned to an Arabic satellite channel, serves as a kind of lifeline as they would have watched the same shows in Sudan. The stiffness in their bodies well clad in outerwear more appropriate for a chilly fall day than a living room hint at a sense of dislocation and discomfort. In another photograph of a married couple, BK sits on the couch next to his wife Nou. BK has used his own experiences as a refugee from Laos and his graduate degree in social work to help other refugees find their footing.

While the photographs reveal the humanity, dignity, and perseverance of their subjects, the images do not show us the raw emotions, troubling experiences, and past traumas that led to emigration, nor the current displacement that immigration often causes. John did not want his camera to act as an intruder and instead created photographs that resonated with themes that his subjects were willing to reveal visually about their own lives. We learn about some of those more distressing moments through the interviews that Sally conducted. Despite BK's professional training, for example, the weight and



John Ruebartsch
Young Burmese men at New Years celebration, 2010
Giclee on rag paper
24" w x 16"h

persistence of post-traumatic stress overwhelmed him and he had to stop his social work. Those darker experiences coupled with the photographs provide the viewer with a fuller sense of the lives pictured.

Milwaukee has long been a global city rich with the cultural diversity that accompanies large numbers of foreign-born inhabitants. We have also been a city that has often refused to embrace newcomers and instead adopted a nativist's prejudice. The Milwaukee Refugee project provides a porthole into the lives of our community's newest immigrants with the intention of evoking empathy. Like a treasured family album, this body of work reveals relationships, rites of passage, and the habits of daily life. The photographs bring these moments out of the private space of the family album and onto the gallery wall so that these faces and their stories may be woven into the broader American fabric and become part of the larger U.S. family album.

Jasmine Alinder is Associate Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and co-coordinator of the Public History program. She is author of Moving Images: Photography and the Japanese American Incarceration (Chicago and Urbana: Univ of Illinois Press, 2009) and has been working to create a digital history of Milwaukee civil rights (www.marchonmilwaukee.uwm.edu), which will be launched in September 2010.



John Ruebartsch
Adey's son Said, center, and friends, 2010
Giclee on rag paper
24" w x 16"h



John Ruebartsch
Pastor BK and his wife Nou at home, 2010
Giclee on rag paper
24" w x 16"h

Displacement, Refuge, and Diaspora

Chia Youyee Vang

Migration is as old as humankind, though the factors that prompt people to move vary. Whether pushed out by war, famine, or oppression, or pulled by the promise of economic opportunity or freedom, displaced people may take months, years, or entire lifetimes to make sense of their situation. Migration across national borders can be particularly traumatic, especially if there is little chance of returning home. What becomes of the millions who are scattered throughout the globe? Essentially stateless and dependent on the willingness of nation states to grant them refuge, their final destinations reflect the complex international humanitarian apparatus that disperse refugees residing in camps to communities across the world that would provide them a safe haven. The photographs in *Here, There, and Elsewhere* show the experiences of some of these people whose journeys away from far-off wars or conflicts have led them to Milwaukee.

While immigrants to the United States usually plan their journeys in advance, refugees differ from immigrants in that they may not have planned to permanently set roots elsewhere. They flee from war



John Ruebartsch
Kay drives her 1950s Allis Chalmers tractor, 2010
Giclee on rag paper
24" w x 16"h

torn environments, political persecution, or natural disasters with the expectation that they will return when the situation improves. Permanent settlement in a new country often results only as the last resort because a return home is no longer viable. They often spend time in temporary refugee camps, and arrive here as displaced, traumatized, and unprepared newcomers. News reports and first person accounts have brought us some of these refugees' background stories. Examples include the Hmong and Lao who fled persecution in Laos by crossing the dangerous Mekong River often at night and without boats; East Africans who walked through deserts to cross borders; young people who were born and raised in refugee camps and in their teens and 20s begin again in the United States. Some lived in cities, but many were subsistence farmers who escaped violence in rural villages, and years later find themselves confronting the harsh realities of contemporary urban life, the demands of literacy, and the intricacies of a cash economy.

Most refugees arrive in the host society with very little resources and are dependent on the generosity of others, including their own ethnic group. U.S. resettlement policies and programs spread the burden of supporting refugees throughout the country in collaboration with private sponsors. In Milwaukee this is done through agencies such as Lutheran Social Services, Catholic Charities, and International



John Ruebartsch
Ma Ra Sul Bi's nephew gets married, 2010
Giclee on rag paper
24" w x 16"h

Institute of Wisconsin. The desire to be near others who speak the same language and share similar traditions frequently motivate refugees to either recruit others to join them or relocate to live near their kin elsewhere.

When you begin life in the United States with not much more than the clothes on your back, it is difficult to imagine anything more. As a former refugee child from Laos, I am not surprised that thousands of refugees from around the world have successfully built meaningful lives in Wisconsin. Like the nearly three million refugees who sought refuge in the United States since the mid 1970s, my family confronted many challenges in the Twin Cities during the 1980s. We lived in some of the most impoverished neighborhoods and attended inner city schools. New arrivals with little or no English had to rely on those who had been in the country longer to interpret for them. Elders like my parents were often isolated from the larger society and yearned for the homeland. Youth experienced feelings of not fitting in and peer pressure led some to engage in negative activities.

Like many of the families pictured here, we may have been poor financially, but we were never poor in family and support. Strong kinship networks of friends and relatives pooled limited resources to start businesses. People came together to form social organizations to provide culturally relevant services. We learned to appreciate the American holidays at the same time that we hosted community events, such as New Year celebrations, to ensure that the younger generation would not forget their parents' culture and its traditions. Many in the younger generation immersed themselves in school activities.

When I see the Hmong woman's joy as she drives her tractor in Oak Creek, the photograph brings back memories of my own family's farming. I remember the summer Saturday morning routines: 5:00 in the morning, my hardworking parents would crack open our bedroom doors and demand, "Sauv os! Txug moo moog muag khoom lawm. Sawv tseeg!" ("Wake up! It's time to go sell vegetables. Wake up now!"). As teenagers we always listened to them even though we wanted to scream, "It's only 5:00am! It's summer vacation! Let us have five more minutes." Now that my father has passed away and my mother is no longer able to work on the farm, my siblings and I reminisce about the backbreaking days that motivated all of us to stay in school, escape into books and pursue other careers far away from that farm. Our English not only helped us with academic achievement and gave us access to new worlds. It also meant that we had to guide our parents through various systems and institutions. Children are the bridges between our refugee parents and U.S. society. They may serve as cultural brokers and interlocutors, but they also carry their parents' hopes and dreams into a place and a future with far more opportunities than where they came from.

While some traditions like farming may be disappearing, refugees make tremendous efforts to incorporate new social practices with traditions brought with them from the homeland. On special

occasions like weddings, for example, we see both western style clothes and traditional dress. Some families integrate into U.S. society by going to church, while others enjoy the freedom to maintain their shamanic or ancestral practices. Access to native language media through satellite TV, email and cell phones can help them maintain transnational ties. Although they may be isolated in their Milwaukee apartment or other diasporic locations, refugees are no longer completely removed from events occurring in their country of birth or elsewhere in the world due to technology.

Regardless of where they came from, refugees commonly arrive here under strenuous conditions, accompanied by much suffering and loss. Yet tragic events paradoxically have a way of creating opportunities for regeneration. In the resulting diasporas, new communities take shape to meet new needs and interests. The everyday experiences of these refugee families in Milwaukee reveal them embracing opportunities for new growth that the city has to offer, as they grapple with its challenges.

Chia Youyee Vang is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and coordinator of the new Hmong Diaspora Studies program there. She was born in Laos and as a child escaped with her family to the United States in 1979.



John Ruebartsch
Three veterans of Burma's 8888 uprising at annual commemoration, 2010
Giclee on rag paper
24" w x 16"h

Here, There, and Elsewhere: An Old Tradition Renewed *John Gurda*

They have come, these newest of the new Milwaukeeans, from places that most of us would have trouble finding on a map—from Burma, Somalia, Laos, Sudan, Vietnam, and a dozen other nations on what is, from an American perspective, the other side of the world. They have not, in most cases, left those lands by choice. Some are fleeing civil war or religious persecution, while others have been set adrift by seismic political shifts. Before they were uprooted, most of the newcomers had little idea that Milwaukee existed, and even less that they would one day make the city their home.

As unfamiliar as they may seem to residents of longer tenure, the families pictured in *Here, There, and Elsewhere* mark a compelling return to one of the community's oldest traditions. Just as the United States is a nation of nations, Milwaukee has long been a city of newcomers. In 1850, only four years after its incorporation, 64 percent of the local population was foreign-born. Germans were the largest single group, but they shared the dusty streets with immigrants from Ireland, England, Norway, Scotland, Bohemia, Sweden, and Holland. The English-speaking Yankees from New York and New England were a minority in their own city.

The pattern intensified as Milwaukee matured. Between 1870 and 1910, the city's population exploded from 71,440 to 373,857, and industrial immigrants accounted for the greatest share of the growth. They came from Poland, Italy, Greece, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Russia, and virtually every other country in southern and eastern Europe, making Milwaukee, by 1890, the most "foreign" city in the United States. Immigrants and their children made up an astounding 86 percent of the community's population in that year—nearly three times the national average.

The peopling of Milwaukee was by no means over at the turn of the twentieth century. In the 1920s, a decade of rapid industrial growth and severe labor shortages, African Americans and Latinos built robust communities on the tentative foundations of earlier years. Their numbers were small by later standards—7,501 African Americans and perhaps 4,000 Mexican immigrants in 1930—but Milwaukee was beginning to develop the truly global diversity of its present day.

It was to this cultural *mélange* that the newcomers of the early twenty-first century have found their way. They define their journeys by the differences they have experienced—the glaring contrasts in climate and cuisine, in language and laws—but there are some deeper similarities. A long look back reveals the fundamental unity that connects the people of Milwaukee's past with those of its present. Unless our ancestors were here when Columbus reached America's shores, the stories of the current newcomers

are neither more nor less than contemporary versions of our own family stories. Like the Hmong and the Burmese, the Bantu and the Lao, earlier generations of Milwaukeeans traded the familiar for the utterly foreign, and not always by choice. Germans suffered exile after the failed revolution of 1848. Irish families faced a stark choice between emigration and starvation. Jews were forced out of tsarist Russia by savage pogroms. Poles and Italians, no less than black sharecroppers and Mexican *campesinos*, had too many mouths to feed and not enough land. The details may have faded and the drama may seem distant, but virtually every group made the same journey as its latter-day counterparts, and over strikingly similar terrain.

Here, There, and Elsewhere is therefore not a revelation but a return. What we see in these carefully made photographs is private lives on public view. We witness at close range the inevitable awkwardness of the uprooted, their heart-rending struggle to embrace the new without abandoning the old. A striking young Somali Bantu woman wraps her head in traditional style - with an American flag. Burmese teens show off the latest "urban" outfits from the streets of America, while an older Sudanese couple keeps their television tuned to Khartoum. Behind a pair of young Somali-American girls, an American flag shares its place of honor with a poster of pilgrims at Mecca.



John Ruebartsch
Two Somali-American girls get ready for a trip to Africa for the summer, 2010
Giclee on rag paper
24" w x 16"h

Although their lives do not lack pathos, these newcomers are anything but pathetic. What we see in their dark eyes is the telling blend of hope, fear, and determination that has always defined the American people. We are a new land even 225 years after our founding, a nation built on differences mediated but not erased by the shared enterprise of self-government. At the core of our national experience is the one quality so abundantly on display in these photographs: the resounding resilience of the human spirit. It is that spirit that *Here, There, and Elsewhere* celebrates. It is that spirit that underlies the historical essence of Milwaukee, and the undying promise of America.

John Gurda is a Milwaukee-born writer and historian who has been studying his hometown since 1972. His books include The Making of Milwaukee, a full-length community history that became an Emmy Award-winning TV documentary series in 2006.



John Ruebartsch
First meeting of the Burmese Muslim Community Association of Milwaukee, 2010
Giclee on rag paper
24" w x 16"h



John Ruebartsch
Beshir and his wife Khadija at home with satellite TV, 2010
Giclee on rag paper
24" w x 16"h

About the artists

John Ruebartsch is a Milwaukee-based photographer and documentarian whose editorial and creative work has been shown locally at Marquette University's Haggerty Museum, WPCA and other galleries, and nationally at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington DC. Recognized by the Wisconsin Humanities Council as a public scholar and by Milwaukee Arts Board as Artist of the Year, his credits include award-winning children's books, (*No Bad News*, Albert Whitman & Co., 2001; *Grandpa's Treasure*, Visual Generation, 2007), and documentary films on the struggles of an indigenous community in Mexico (*Voices of the Sierra Tarahumara*, Sundance, 2001). His documentary film on Minnesota conservationist Ernest Oberholtzer (*Ober's Island: A Living Legacy*, 2009) recently aired on Twin Cities Public TV. His own experiences as the child of refugee parents – his family fled Eastern Europe for the US when he was four – give him an important point of connection with the immigrant families in this project.

Sally Kuzma is a visual artist and teacher whose digitally-based prints, installations, and drawings are often focused on intimate observations of nature and particular places. Her work has been exhibited regionally and nationally, commissioned for public spaces, and is in collections from Armenia to Grinnell, Iowa. This collaborative project with the photographer John Ruebartsch is her first documentary, and grew out of daily encounters with adult refugees in her job as an ESL instructor at International Learning Center in Milwaukee. Her background growing up in a community of Eastern European immigrants in upstate New York informs her interest in the different ways people rebuild their identities and communities in a new place.

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