

Mother of Exiles

By Anne Peretz with Martin Garbus

FLATLANDS AS FAR AS YOU COULD SEE, the occasional oil rig cutting the skyline—a walk through Dilley, Texas, on a Sunday afternoon produced no living human being, not even a dog. They told us there were two thousand people but the ominous stillness forewarned what was coming next. An eight-lane highway extended as far as one could see, straight from the border of Mexico. Next to this outlandish stretch of road were four motels, three gas stations, one market, and one Mexican restaurant called Millie's. Across the road and down a bit were two miles of metal fencing and two long, low buildings—a maximum-security prison for men and a detention center that housed women and children. No trees anywhere—just hundreds of tall posts supporting huge lights defined the barren space.

In late January 2019, four of us—Carolina Grynbal and myself from the Parenting Journey in Massachusetts, and Martin Garbus and James O'Malley, both lawyers—spent a week in Dilley at the South Texas Family Residential Center, a detention center that holds approximately 2,400 women and children.¹ Including the four of us, there were twenty-two volunteers and ten staff members. The sponsoring organization is called the Dilley Pro Bono Project, which is housed inside the prison. The staff and volunteers are primarily lawyers and paralegals. We were there to help detained mothers and children prepare for their “credible-fear” interviews. A credible-fear interview, if you can pass it, gets you one step closer to the possibility of asylum in the United States.

Before beginning our thirteen-hour workdays, we were trained during a four-hour seminar the night we arrived. Our days were mostly spent helping mothers shape their cases for the credible-fear interview. The goal was to build a case to convince the asylum officers that the mothers were in danger, persecuted, and in fear for their lives if they stayed in their countries of origin. Fear and persecution are the qualities that count most—a successful credible-fear interview, which usually took place within a week or two of arriving at the detention center, would allow a family to move on to temporary residency with their sponsor (usually a relative) in the United States until they are called by the asylum court. The applicant's next challenge after United States entry is to appear before an asylum judge. Preparing families for this first interview, which they must do alone, often without a lawyer present, is critical in helping them prove that their situations are so dangerous that fleeing their countries is the only path to survival.

There are a series of “immutable variables,” or things that cannot be changed, that may qualify a woman and her children to become eligible for the next step in this long process. These variables, the “nexus

criteria,” include being part of a persecuted indigenous minority, race, or nationality; being a member of a persecuted religious group or threatened political group; threats of death to a family or child (a threat to one adult is inadequate); or a situation in which the government or police cannot or will not intervene. There are also domestic violence and rape cases, which are harder to argue, but if a woman has experienced rape or major threats of violence, or has recently endured violence or the death of a family member, her case is made stronger. Almost every woman that seeks asylum has experienced domestic violence and slavery, meaning she is the property of the husband or man in her life and has no freedom. In the many places where there is gang involvement, muggings for money is routine.

If one can show multiple events from these circumstances that include many disturbing details, a “good” case can be made. And so, ironically, a “good” case is one that is particularly bad, and vice versa. Many women say they want a better life for their children; they want to work and not be afraid. And while these are the people we might want and need to cross our southern border, they are not the successful cases. The successful case is the most hair-raising.

In the large room designated for us at the prison, some children ran around, while others clung to their mothers or watched repetitive cycles of TV shows. When we asked why there were no toys, books, or crayons, the officials told us, “This is not a playground—this is a prison.” Well, yes, it certainly was, and the prison owners made sure it felt like one, though compared to the conditions from which the women and children had recently been released, it may have felt like an upscale hotel.

Where did these women and children come from? How did they get here? Their stories were similar in many respects. Most had come from the triangle of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. When

they reached the United States border, they crossed the Rio Grande in different places, mostly near McAllen, Texas. The Rio Grande changes depth and force depending on rain, time of year, and location; it is usually a fast current about knee-deep, though sometimes it rises as high as chest-level. Needless to say, it is quite frightening to children and women who don't swim. When they arrived on the other side, they turned themselves in to a processing center or ICE representative—they were not sneaking in—and were taken to what have now become the infamous “ice boxes” or “*hieleras*,” where they were stripped of their outer garments, given a plastic sheet, and held under extremely cold temperatures. Then after a day or two, they were transferred to the “dog cages” or “*perreras*,” where they mostly stood up or slept on a concrete floor if they could find space, sometimes for several days. They were mostly unable to sleep and sometimes poked by guards if they did fall asleep. They have very limited toilet facilities and were fed two ham sandwiches a day. Sickness abounded among them. When they had gone through this calculated and precise torture, after their previous persecutions and hair-raising treks to the border, they were released onto buses and brought to Dilley or similar detention centers across Texas.

A twenty-one-year-old woman, with the sadness and beauty of an Orozco painting, tears in her eyes, explained that she has stage-three cervical cancer. A two-year-old boy was sleeping on her lap. She wants to see her child grow up. She has an aunt who is a nurse in Minnesota and will get her medical care. Since she became sick, her husband didn't want her any longer. He treated her like a slave, made her do all the housework and cooking, and wouldn't let her

out of the house. He threatened to cut her up into four pieces if she went outside. He took up with other women. Frail and almost fainting, she pleaded with us, “Please help me live.”

Another woman, Cristina, was there with her eight-year-old son. She and her family ran an egg business in Honduras. Each Friday, gang members appeared and extorted money. One day, as Cristina was holding her bicycle, which she used to deliver eggs to the neighbors, she saw her uncle in an altercation with a gang member. She heard him say, “This is enough! You have been doing this for years and I am not giving you any more money.” A second later she heard a gunshot and saw her uncle fall dead on the roadway. That night her parents fled into the mountains and disappeared, eventually finding work picking coffee beans. Cristina, devastated, terrified, and alone, kept on delivering eggs a few weeks longer, but the price of extortion had gone up, as had her fear. One night, without telling a soul, she grabbed her son and raced to the mountains to find her parents and tell them she was leaving for the United States. She no longer felt safe—once a gang knows you, they can always find you. In such cases the police are not helpful. The gangs are often collaborators with the police, and if they know you have gone to the authorities, you are in even greater danger. Cristina found her parents, they gave her all the money they had, and that night she departed Honduras with her son.

We were not allowed to touch the children or the mothers, even though there was great temptation to hug and comfort them. We were not allowed to inspect the places they slept or ate, but we heard little complaint. There was fear and exhaustion, but there was also hope. No longer wet and cold, they'd come to

understand that we were on their side, despite the prison atmosphere. They could see that we were determined to get them through this first stage of the asylum-seeking process. Sometimes our small group worked in teams. When I joined with Marty, a lawyer and my partner, we noticed that our different approaches formed an especially effective partnership in helping these brave, traumatized women through the difficult process. My experience as a family therapist helped me to engage gently with terrified mothers. In one instance we were able to convince a woman named Maria that we were on her side, and that we could help her pass the initial credible-fear interview. In order to prepare, I explained, we would need to ask her difficult personal questions, which might bring up bad memories. I explained to her that we did this so that she would be prepared and willing to talk about terrible traumas even if they made her cry. By now, Marty and I were also tearful. My daughter's former babysitter Valeria was on the phone from New York, translating for us as Maria sat and talked with us in a small room. By the second day, Valeria had such a strong sense of the emotional intensity of these meetings that the mothers bonded with her as well. Through all of this, Marty sat slightly behind me, with his eyes closed, listening. When I was done with my difficult questioning, I turned to him and asked if he wanted to say something to Maria. He looked intently at her and said, "What I hear you saying is, 'I have been molested by men since I was a teenager. When my father wouldn't pay the weekly shakedown for money from the local MS13 gang, he was killed right in front of my face, his blood splattered over my body, and the gang member threatened to kill my son next week if there was no money. We had almost nothing. And besides that, my neighbor was shot to death two weeks earlier for the same reason. There was nothing to do but run.' Is that right? Is that what you said?" Tears came down both Maria's and Marty's cheeks. As a lawyer, he was helping her frame her statement, just as I, as a therapist, had elicited the details of her terrible history.

As Marty has written elsewhere, our country has come a long way in the 136 years since Emma Lazarus penned the words on the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free . . ." These days in particular, the less-known previous stanza must also be remembered:

*Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall
stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-band
Glows world-wide welcome . . .*



ANNE PERETZ is the founder of the Parenting Journey, which has its headquarters in Somerville, Massachusetts, and a satellite office in New York City. She is perhaps best known on the Outer Cape for her work as a painter, having had two retrospective exhibitions at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum. She is currently represented locally by Rice Polak Gallery.

MARTIN GARBUS is widely known for his work on behalf of clients Daniel Ellsberg, Cesar Chavez, Václav Havel, and Nelson Mandela, in addition to his recent work for the Dilley Pro Bono Project. In the arts, he has represented Samuel Beckett, Allen Ginsberg, Philip Roth, Robert Mapplethorpe, Sally Mann, and the estate of Mark Rothko, among many others.

Please see a book review of Martin Garbus's North of Havana by Michael T. Jones on page 126.

Note:

1. The detention center is run by CoreCivic, a company that contributed \$250,000 to President Trump's inauguration. CoreCivic has a \$1 billion contract with the United States Department of Homeland Security, a flourishing business, and a recent stock offering. Lost in all the current administration's talk of "rapists and killers" is the enormous profit that goes to these corporate Trump supporters, unnecessarily jailing thousands of mothers and children.