

20.08.08 New Virginians

Jacques Mushagasha [00:00:06] They should know that we are very grateful. Maybe some of them can think that we take it for granted. The opportunity that I have here I would never have back home.

Sarah McConnell [00:00:17] This is Jacques Mushagasha, who is a teacher in Congo and Burundi. He survived the war and a massacre there. And after becoming a refugee in Zambia, he immigrated to this country.

Jacques Mushagasha [00:00:29] And too many of these immigrants don't come here just because they want to live in our country. Some of them are forced to leave their country. So put yourself in those shoes. In the shoes of those immigrants. If it happened to you. No way. You would like people to walk on you. That's what we would like them to do also.

Sarah McConnell [00:00:49] From Virginia Humanities, This is With Good Reason. For more than 400 years, immigrants and refugees have helped shape the character of the United States. Today, immigration seems to be a prominent wedge issue in American politics. But what's often lost in the heated arguments are the personal histories of the newcomers. Some coming as immigrants seeking a better life. Others coming as refugees fleeing political persecution, war and genocide. I'm Sara McConnell. And today on With Good Reason: listening to immigration stories.

Sarah McConnell [00:01:34] Over an eight month period in 2018. David Bearinger and his colleague Pat Jarrett at Virginia Humanities filmed in-depth personal accounts with 34 immigrants and refugees. They ranged in age from 19 to 81. They've come to the U.S. from Mexico, Central and South America, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Ireland and the former Soviet republics. David Bearinger is director of the grants program at Virginia Humanities. Pat Jarrett is with the Virginia Folklife Program. Here's former With Good Reason producer Elliot Majerczyk speaking with David Bearinger about the project.

Elliot Majerczyk [00:02:14] David, before we're going to play some excerpts, I know this might be a hard question for you to answer. Did you find there was an underlying theme or a commonality from all the people that you interviewed?

David Bearinger [00:02:26] I think that what all of these immigration stories have in common is the journey and even a relatively easy immigration journey is difficult. Two words come to mind, one is complicated, and one is gratitude. The picture of the immigrant experience and what it means to come here to this country from another country and in many cases another continent is very complicated, complicated for the individual going through that experience of the family. And it's also complicated in aggregate. None of these two stories are the same. And then gratitude is the other word. And I would say that that's the universal theme of all 32 of these conversations.

Elliot Majerczyk [00:03:12] David, tell me a little about the people that you interviewed. Who are they?

David Bearinger [00:03:17] It was important to us not to create a gauzy picture of immigrant success because success means different things in different contexts. So we interviewed high school Spanish teacher, a woman who is a cleaner in a poultry plant, a Virginia state delegate, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide, internationally known artist from Mongolia. And the list goes on.

Elliot Majerczyk [00:03:41] Well, let's start to play some of the excerpts from some of the interviews you heard. There's a prevalent belief that most immigrants come here seeking a better economic life. But I think with all the present media focused on Washington, we really don't get much of an opportunity to find out or being informed about the ongoing violence and warfare in many countries outside this country. I think the result is we tend to forget the actual trauma that many immigrants, unfortunately, have experienced.

David Bearinger [00:04:13] Let me back up just a second and say that many people do come here to better themselves economically, find new opportunities for themselves and their children. That's very common. But there are a lot of reasons why people come here. And so it's important not to be too categorical. Let's hear first from a young woman named Sally Imran, who is from Iraq. She was born in Baghdad. The story she's going to tell is from a time when she was eight years old. And then the second piece we're going to hear is from Jacques Mushagasha. And Jacques is a refugee from Congo.

Sally Imran [00:04:51] So I was at the balcony and a man was just walking. I can see him from far away. No one's around him. And a shot "pow" just hit him right on his shoulder. That was the first time I see someone get shot. And I can see the sniper right there. So clear I cannot see it. No one is there to help him. No one. He tried to get up. The man tried to get up. And there's the second shot "boom" right in his head. Should I scream? Should I yell? Should I cry? What can I do? Because in my mind, I'm eight years old child, eight year. Am I supposed to go to my mother? Mom, go help that man. Because I know if my mom goes to help him, she is going to die. If I start screaming, he gonna see me and he gonna kill me, when I think about it now, if I would have done anything of these, I would be dead to.

Jacques Mushagasha [00:05:47] We had to make a choice. And it was not an easy one. People who were mostly in danger are educated people, religious leaders, they even beheaded one of the archbishops just to create terror in the city. I had to leave the country.

David Bearinger [00:06:06] Sally, when we interviewed her, was 21 years old. She was working three jobs and taking classes at community college in Harrisonburg, where she lives. And her dream is to work in the field of human services. So you have this young woman who's experienced these horrific scenes in her early life. The incident she describes is not the only one. She comes here and she wants to give back. Same is true of Jacques. Jacques had a terrible time in Congo and he moved through a series of refugee settlements and camps in various African countries before he came here. And his strong commitment is to give back and to improve governance in Africa. And in fact, he's founded two organizations designed to do that. He also is a leader of the Congolese community in Harrisonburg. He provides links between the Congolese community and the larger Harrisonburg community. Another way, he finds it important to give back. I said that all immigration stories are different. That's true. But there's a commonality. There are things there's an experience that connects all of them. And the challenge of redefining what's meant by home, the challenge of deciding what you can hold onto and what you have to let go of the challenge of having two countries. And that theme will come up a little later as we as we listen to some more.

Elliot Majerczyk [00:07:31] Well, talking about the theme of having two countries, even though most people might be coming here for economic reasons. Again, it's hard for many people to realize how hard it is to leave a culture. Listening to some of these stories, it's almost like you really can't go home again and again.

David Bearinger [00:07:52] It's complicated because for some people, there's no thought of going back home. For other people, that's a lifelong dream. Some people go back home and find that it's not the place they remember. Some people can go back home but feel that their children can't. Some longed to take their children back with them, but can't. So we're going to hear from Karla Almendarez-Ramos, who is the director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs for the city of Richmond and is from Honduras. And then from Solomon Isekeije, who's from Nigeria and who teaches art. In fact, he's head of the the art department at Norfolk State University, which is a historically black college in Norfolk, Virginia.

Karla Almendarez-Ramos [00:08:34] I have not taken them back to Honduras in some way if the fear of the unsafe meat unsafe there for them because they don't speak fluently. They hold their way. So they will be noticed. And that's my fear that they would be a target. But at the same time, it's sad they do not know their uncles, great uncles that cousins. That is one of the things we lose when we migrate, it's connections to community, to family, to roots.

Solomon Isekeij [00:09:14] When you leave a place like Nigeria, about two years or a year and half there about after you're no longer really considered Nigerian by Nigerians who live there. Because the notion is that your worldview has evolved. In essence, your Nigerian card has been revoked. You know, if I say something like, well, we're working on this project, how about we approach it from this point of view? They say, "Well no, brother, you don't understand. You know, you've been away for too long." The way they relate to you is that of an American. You're an American now. You're not a Nigerian anymore.

Elliot Majerczyk [00:09:48] For many immigrants, once they do settle in, as you mentioned, there's a sense of gratitude and a desire and need to give back. Some of the immigrants you interviewed were part of the military or even had members of their family who joined the services.

David Bearinger [00:10:03] That's right. Two of our interviewees had served in the United States Marine Corps. Both had been deployed abroad. The first is Prio Karmarkar. He joined the Marine Corps soon after he got to the United States and later earned a master's degree in computer engineering and he is from Bangladesh.

Prio Karmarkar [00:10:20] I mean, you have to think it. I'm contributing here. That's my pride. That I'm not sitting here taking benefit. No, I am an American. I am leading my life here for contributing my knowledge, my skills and everything. My case in the military, but in other people were that they're making business here, they are creating employment here.

David Bearinger [00:10:45] The next is Solomon Isekeije from Nigeria, who we just heard from and his daughter recently enlisted in the U.S. Navy.

Solomon Isekeij [00:10:53] Well, it means everything. You know, I have kids here. I have daughters. Actually, one of them just left the house and decided that what she wants to do is join the U.S. Navy. Having a child in the Navy is probably one of those things that I probably never thought would ever happen. So where else would I go? My own child, right, serves the U.S. Navy.

David Bearinger [00:11:16] Many people, I would say the majority of people who come here and have children or who have children when they after they've been here for a while. Like all parents, they want the best for their children. Most people, I would say, want their children to understand the cultures that their parents came from. But they also want them to be fully American. And so it gets complicated pretty quickly.

Elliot Majerczyk [00:11:42] However, an additional stress for newcomers is there changing relationship with their children in adapting to this new.

David Bearinger [00:11:50] Sure. And the children, whether they are born here or whether they come here as young children with their immigrant or migrant parents, become American very quickly, they learn the language quickly. Sometimes they end up interpreting for their parents.

Elliot Majerczyk [00:12:05] They want to fit in with their peers.

David Bearinger [00:12:07] They want to fit in. And so they they learned the popular culture. They sometimes serve as the interface between the family and the school of the community. Let's listen to Farideh Goldin and Farideh is from, was born in Iran. She came here as a young woman to study. And the very day has young girls or young children. And she's talking about what happened to her children at school and how she was confronted with the fact that she was more different than she actually thought she was.

Farideh Goldin [00:12:43] When they were at school, I would send them lunch. So I always pack them when I knew and made Iranian food for them. Very quickly, they found that their friends thought that there were strange. Nobody wanted to exchange anything and that, you know, with them, they all had their M&Ms and they had potato chips. And then one day, I think the awakening came when someone told my youngest, "your mom speaks funny." She said, "My mom doesn't speak funny." She said "Yeah yeah yeah. Your mom speaks really funny." So all three of them walked in the house that day after school. They said "mom say something." I said, "what do you mean?" "No. Just talk." So I didn't know what was going on. And then they looked at each other and said, "oh, my gosh. She speaks funny." So was like all of a sudden there were like eight, nine. They realized that I was different.

David Bearinger [00:13:34] Talking about what immigrants and refugees naturally want for their children makes me think about a woman from Mexico named Isabel Castillo. And Isabel came here when I believe she was six years old. She was the child of migrant parents who were working in agriculture. She came from Mexico. Isabel has received an honorary doctorate for her work on behalf of immigrants, particularly Latinos. She has a master's degree in conflict transformation from Eastern Mennonite University. And when we interviewed her back in the late spring, she was nine months pregnant with their first child. And she's gonna talk to us about how she feels about her son and his relationship to his Mexican heritage.

Isabel Castillo [00:14:24] So we're expecting our first baby, we're having a little boy. And definitely want him to know his Mexican side. I speak to him in Spanish right now that he's in my womb. So I know that I want him to learn Spanish. I know that I want him to, you know, eat the food that my mom makes and his great grandmother, which I hope she can come and be with him when he's born. And I wish that I could take him to Mexico so that he could know where I'm from and his roots. But at the moment, I won't be able to do that. Him and my husband could go, but I wouldn't be able to go with them. I'm trying to remain

hopeful that hopefully people in Congress stop playing politics with real human lives and give us some kind of pathway.

Elliot Majerczyk [00:15:29] And with that is the sad reality that we're not even always that welcoming to the children of immigrants that are here.

David Bearinger [00:15:37] We heard that it happens. And unfortunately, sometimes there are incidents where people who are newly here and vulnerable experience hostility or a kind of curiosity that isn't really helpful. And to Sally Imran, who we've heard from earlier in this talk, had an experience in school in Harrisonburg. And she describes here her complicated relationship to a decision she made about wearing the hijab.

Sally Imran [00:16:09] I remember I came back home telling my mom I did not want to go back to this school anymore. It feels like this is not my place. Telling me, "Why are you wearing this?" I will walk and student will look at me, who is that? Why is she here? What is she wearing? I saw all these questions in their face. I felt like I should answer all of these questions when I shouldn't. Now, I should have kept wearing this thing. I felt like before when I first wore it, it represent who I am. I look beautiful. I am very happy from inside. And now I feel guilty that I made someone just by the way they look at me judging me and they make me take it off. I feel so guilty now.

Elliot Majerczyk [00:16:56] And you have another clip from one of your interviewees who speaks about not being welcomed here?

David Bearinger [00:17:02] Yeah. It's Isabel Castillo. She's lived in this country in the state of Virginia for the past 25 years. And she talks here about what it was like for her in school and also what she's feeling, feels sometimes, with the rhetoric that surrounds the whole subject of immigration.

Isabel Castillo [00:17:22] And it's just hard with this whole rhetoric of like, we don't want you here, that I should go back and that I'm an illegal, you know, really dislike that term. No human being is illegal. But it just seems like so many things are against us. But we're still here and I'm still here.

Elliot Majerczyk [00:17:43] David, I was thinking about the language that we employ. The differential language that we employ. I'm from Canada. I'm from Montreal. I never say, or nobody ever expects me to say I immigrated from Montreal. I came from Canada, but we use the language, we expect people to say, I'm an immigrant from Bangladesh. I'm an immigrant from Iraq. And I think that's very revealing.

David Bearinger [00:18:15] It's also revealing how we tend to lump people together and create categories. The term Latino is a pretty good example of that because I don't think anybody living in Honduras or Mexico thinks of herself as a Latina or Latino. This is a category that they enter when they come here that we use to describe a very diverse group of people from Mexico, Central and South America. They are not the same. And there are multiple cultures and ethnicities within many of these countries. And so when we say Latino or Latina, it reduces all of that down to one single blind category, which I think diminishes the whole conversation about immigration.

Elliot Majerczyk [00:19:07] And carrying on with this idea of generalization and lumping people together, we tend to think all immigrants who arrive here have the same political outlook. But it's a lot more complex than that.

David Bearinger [00:19:20] It is. And the people we spoke to, a Republicans and Democrats, or they have no political affiliation. And I will say that as we were engaged in these conversations, we did our very best to avoid politics. This was about the stories of people who are coming here and what they experienced. One of the people we talked to is named Seyoum Berhe and Seyoum grew up in Ethiopia near the Eritrean border. He came here as a college student, but he was actually fleeing a very difficult military situation in Ethiopia. Seyoum has spent the past 20 or more years of his life working in the field of refugee resettlement. He's now the director of the Office of Newcomer Services for the Commonwealth of Virginia, which is a state agency. And Seyoum talks here about how he speaks to refugees he's working with, how he advises them.

Seyoum Berhe [00:20:21] Let me give you the bad news. Whatever we try to do is minimal. We know it. We want it like that, because this is a featured, individualistic nation that you must somehow have to work hard because this paternalistic kind of dependency is something I have never believed. I always tell them, start right now, planning to survive on your own. And if you get help. Well, great, but don't depend on it. So when I talk to African refugees, I said don't be shocked when somebody looks at you like you're a little bit less. That is a reason for that. That is history for that. They're not right. But don't get so angry to a point of giving up on your life. Then you suffer under. I'm not very diplomatic in talking to refugees because I want them to. I won't tell them the truth and I always tell them it's going to be difficult. You're gonna regret the day if you are a Muslim, conservative, Muslim, not every mother and your daughter goes out on a date and she tells you she went out on a date. Boy, you're going to have a rough night. Get ready right now. This is the country you have chosen. It's OK. Make has to be responsible rather than getting crazy on hash or when you or your wife start working, you know, thank God she's gonna help you. The kids are gonna be 100 percent American. You can't help it. It's gonna happen. I want them to be ready.

Elliot Majerczyk [00:21:44] Listening to Seyoum, I think it's important to stay that all immigrants don't come here with unrealistic expectations about the easy life, the good life. People are aware or become aware pretty quickly of the problems in this country.

David Bearinger [00:22:00] I would say that most of the people we talked to came here believing that they were coming to the best country in the world. And I think that all of the people we talked to still believe that. But these are intelligent people. Many of them have experienced some difficulty making a life here. They speak pretty frankly about the fact that there is a difficult side to living in America. There are problems here. So let's listen to Karla Ramos and how she talks about this.

Carla Ramos [00:22:32] We see this country as hope for the best life, but we are used to corruption in our countries. You know, we see all this and we believe that it doesn't happen here, that there is justice. But I have seen injustice here and I have seen corruption. But what I've also seen is when the opportunity is there, there is correction of things and things are brought to justice that I didn't see in my country. So that is the hope that this country gives to me.

Elliot Majerczyk [00:23:15] Even though there's the reality of the daily hardships and resistance that we don't even hear about. Listening to these recordings, I'm struck by how the words and attitudes remind us not to take a lot of the opportunities and even the ideals in this country for granted. I mean, listening to somebody else, being so grateful about being here does alter your perspective.

David Bearinger [00:23:44] OK. So what we heard over and over again is a deep appreciation for what this country is, what it offers, the freedoms, the opportunities, the safety. And so we're going to hear a couple of perspectives on that. One is from Seyoum, who talks a little bit about the sense of obligation he feels to help others because others helped him. One is from Sally, who talks very movingly about her desire to protect this country and its people. Jaques talks about his joy in arriving in the United States, coming out of those travails of Africa.

Seyoum Berhe [00:24:22] But I, too, was helped by so many people. So that is the obligation, really. That I have an obligation to do the same thing people did for me. To me, that's America. My interpretation of the United States is literally people coming together out of the dust and becoming someone.

Sally Imran [00:24:42] I thank God every day. And I thank my mom every day. Of course, because she did it, that she brought me to a country that I think is the greatest country in the world, where do they give you opportunity, and they give you life. It's everything. And I'm always going to do anything to support and help and keep this country safe.

Jacques Mushagasha [00:25:06] When I landed in New York. Oh, my goodness. That was the highest point of joy in my life because one, I was out of the all the troubles in Africa, in the Congo. And two I was now hoping to come and start a new living.

David Bearinger [00:25:25] It's been repeated over and over again that we are a nation of immigrants. My parents were immigrants.

Elliot Majerczyk [00:25:32] What do you think that causes people to have, some people, not all people, to have a fear of immigrants. Is it loss of jobs, loss of power?

David Bearinger [00:25:45] There may be some insecurity in it. I think that the situation we face today with immigrants and refugees, people being afraid, anxious, is not new. It's something that my grandparents probably experienced. Irish immigrants, Italian immigrants, Chinese have always faced suspicion and a negative reaction at some level at some time. We sometimes fear the other.

Elliot Majerczyk [00:26:16] Wouldn't you say, David, you know, in your experience and the experience of doing these interviews, it really goes a long way in meeting and talking to people face to face and overcoming that barrier, getting to know them.

David Bearinger [00:26:32] And it was amazing to both of us who were doing these interviews, how much people were willing to share with us about their inner experience, the things that happened to them. Yes. But also how they felt about it and also how they felt about the United States, how they felt about being in Virginia. It was deep. It was honest. It was sometimes emotional. There were times when everybody in the room was in tears, not because what we were talking about was sad, but because of the power of it.

Elliot Majerczyk [00:27:02] David, thank you for your work and thank you for allowing us to have the opportunity to hear these voices and to share it with our audience.

David Bearinger [00:27:11] It's a pleasure. Thank you.

Sarah McConnell [00:27:20] That was former with good reason producer Elliot Majerczyk, speaking with David Bearinger, who is the director of the grants program at Virginia Humanities.

Sarah McConnell [00:27:29] Portraits of the people who spoke of their immigrant experience were taken by photographer and videographer Pat Jarret. You can see those portraits at our Web site. WithGoodReasonRadio.org. This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back.

Sarah McConnell [00:28:02] Welcome back to With Good Reason from Virginia Humanities. I'm Sarah McConnell. Martin Scorsese's film "Gangs of New York" is set in the mid 1800s and tells the story of fighting between Irish Catholic immigrants and the established Protestant gangs in the city.

SFX: Gangs of New York [00:28:26] In the second year of the great civil war, when the Irish brigade marched through the streets, New York was a city full of tribes. When the Irish came, the city was in a fever. Since the time of the Great Famine, they'd come streaming off the boats and they got a right warm welcome. Go back to Ireland.

Sarah McConnell [00:28:52] In fact, the Protestant community in New York City and elsewhere picked up destitute Irish Catholic children off the streets and sent them away on what came to be known as orphan trains to be raised by Protestant families out west. Up to one million Catholic children were taken in this way and most would never see their parents again. It was Irish Catholic nuns that eventually put a stop to the orphan trains, and it was their determined efforts to keep poor Irish Catholic children with their own parents.

Sarah McConnell [00:29:25] That became the foundation for America's welfare system and foster care. Maureen Fitzgerald is a professor of religious studies at William and Mary. She's the author of "Habits of Compassion: Irish Catholic Nuns and the Origins of New York's Welfare System."

Sarah McConnell [00:29:44] Where did the story begin of the Irish nuns in America that eventually formed the foundation for our welfare system.

Maureen Fitzgerald [00:29:51] It begins in Ireland, where a very small number of women were nuns, but they were part of the famine migration. About a million people starve to death. Another two million moved to North America. And in the process, over the next several decades, Ireland's population was cut in about half. What were they seeking in America? They were seeking survival. Some of them came often through chain migration, where families would contribute collectively to send one migrant over. If that first link in the chain was somehow broken, the people on the other side in Ireland risked being sent away from their homes or starving to death.

Sarah McConnell [00:30:40] How were the Irish communities perceived at that time?

Maureen Fitzgerald [00:30:44] When the Irish came, they were not only Catholic, but they were very poor. And so the kinds of prejudice they face combined that Catholicism and that poverty in a very specific kind of way.

Sarah McConnell [00:30:58] So what did the Protestants do about these poor Catholic paupers as they saw them?

Maureen Fitzgerald [00:31:03] Well, they tried to do a lot of things with adults and adults were not very amenable to being reformed. So what they did is they moved to children. The kids who were on the streets in New York or Boston or Philly, they were on the street during school hours. A Protestant mission could pick them up. If the parents did not find them within 24 to 48 hours, that Protestant mission could have legal authority over them for the length of that child minority. A million kids were taken in this way.

Sarah McConnell [00:31:36] I'm trying to imagine how huge an impact that would have been. Weren't parents up in arms over having their children wrenched from them in this way?

Maureen Fitzgerald [00:31:43] Of course, they were absolutely devastated and many of them were Irish speakers or Gaelic speakers only. They were not English speakers. They went to their churches. They asked for help. They did what they could. But the mission really tried very hard to make sure that the parents would not have any contact with children, because what they did is they didn't just keep them in the mission in the city. They put them on trains and they sent them to the Midwest to live within Protestant families for the length of their minority because the point was to break up the family. The point was not to reproduce this Irish Catholic system that the mainstream believed was going to actually reproduce poverty.

Sarah McConnell [00:32:25] They thought, like so many people think today of the stubbornly poor, that it was somehow their fault.

Maureen Fitzgerald [00:32:32] It was clearly parents fault, because if they were adults and they were living in poverty, they must have done something to get there. But kids didn't need to suffer for their sins. This is their language of their parents. And so they were willing and they thought they were being very benevolent to take those kids out of those situations and put them in a better place.

Sarah McConnell [00:32:54] So what did become of a million up to a million children who were part of these orphan trains between 1850s and 1900?

Maureen Fitzgerald [00:33:03] You can see a range in anecdotal evidence from people who, I think there's a there's a governor of Michigan, who was a kid who was placed with a family. That family was very devoted to him. He was very, very much brought up as an adopted son. And he eventually becomes governor of Michigan. So he saw that as a very positive experience. There are lots of other kids who run away from these situations. There was certainly danger for boys, or especially young girls who were not young enough to be really integrated into the family. What they used either as farm labor and having their labor exploited or for young girls being sexually exploited. And so we do see a lot of concern by the 1870s in states throughout the Midwest that essentially what these Protestant missions are doing are dumping these kids and they're not overseeing how the family is treating them. Those kids then end up being on the streets of places like Detroit and Chicago because they then have to make it on their own somehow in the Midwest. There is occasionally a story where a parent will actually find a child who had been brought up in another family. But it's very rare.

Sarah McConnell [00:34:25] So when did the Irish Catholic nuns come into the picture?

Maureen Fitzgerald [00:34:28] Well, they come in very quickly. First work that the nuns I look at in New York did was to work with single women. The Sisters of Mercy, for instance. They are most known for bringing in 20000 of the single Irish females and putting them into domestic service positions. They would also, because they were the nuns were probably the only literate people in this population. They'd write letters back home. They'd send the money home. And so essentially, the nuns themselves were links in that chain. Once the immediacy of the famine had passed, the focus really shifted from single women to children. And the idea that they had to stop what was going on with what they called the kidnaping of these children. And so they began in many senses to expand their convent, simply to take in kids. In some cases, if they had set up schools, they would put beds in the schools rooms with the idea that if a child was in any way susceptible to being picked up, a parent could bring that child to the nuns, keep them with the nuns, and they would not then be vulnerable to the Protestant missions.

Maureen Fitzgerald [00:35:42] They expanded this tremendously. Once the Irish had power in City Hall to start funneling lots of money to the nuns so that, you know, what might have been a small convent that would be a three-story building in Washington Square, became an enormous institution that could house anywhere from eight hundred to twelve hundred kids.

Sarah McConnell [00:36:08] Really?

Maureen Fitzgerald [00:36:09] Yeah, they were enormous. And at the height of this in New York, I believe they had 15,000 children in institutions at any one time. Parents would put the kids in when they thought they were close enough to poverty to warrant the kids at least getting three meals a day and some schooling. But parents always had the right to take kids out when and if they wanted to. What these nuns wanted to do was to make those ties with parents as absolutely strong as possible. They also, of course, wanted to reproduced Irish Catholicism. And to give you a statistic on nuns, there were 500 of them in all of the United States in 1850. There were 50,000 of them in 1900 and about 4000, three to 4000 in New York City alone.

Maureen Fitzgerald [00:37:02] So they come from Working-Class backgrounds. They they have a critique, certainly of the Protestant reformers, but they also have a critique of how Protestants are treating the poor. There is within Catholicism a less sense of shame in being poor. If you can imagine that Catholicism developed in the medieval period where class hierarchies were static, they were not dynamic. You were not poor because you had a moral failing. You were poor because you were born a serf. There wasn't anything to punish you about. You were not rich because you were terrific morally. You were rich because you were born that way. You were born into that lineage. So that's the economic system that Catholicism comes from and importantly, Judaism also had a very similar critique of the way the Protestants treated the poor. Judaism presumes they'll be poor. There will be poor people. And there are many injunctions for Jews to take care of the poor and especially not to take credit for taking care of the poor. But just to presume they're there and presume that if you're lucky enough to have something to give to someone, that you should.

Sarah McConnell [00:38:22] So what eventually happened with the system where the nuns were taking in the Catholic children to keep them from being bused out west? Did that system work beautifully?

Maureen Fitzgerald [00:38:32] Absolutely not, because even if the nuns were down the street, those nuns now were taking mothering and parenting responsibilities from those parents. And so those parents lost control of their kids for a short time rather than for eternity. But nonetheless, it is a very painful decision for a lot of poor people to make. They often made it thinking that if they had enough, they had a good break here or they were lucky there, they could bring the kids back. But it often took them much longer to get the kids back or to get the right apartments so that they felt they could take the kids back.

Sarah McConnell [00:39:10] Well, how do you see that these institutions became part of the underpinnings for the welfare system then?

Maureen Fitzgerald [00:39:16] Well, what was critical is that the premise that the state had an obligation to care for poor children and that parents should not necessarily lose all legal rights to their children because they were in poverty. The two parts of the welfare state we still live with today and they're both terribly imperfect, is that the state pays mothers especially to care for children. If the state deems those mothers good mothers. If the state deems those mothers bad mothers, it will pay another mother to rear that child. But it won't be in a Catholic institution. It will likely be within an individual home.

Sarah McConnell [00:39:57] It's really amazing to me. The parallels seem so strong between how mainstream Americans viewed the wretchedly poor Irish at the turn of the 20th century and how mainstream America now sees poor African-American community.

Maureen Fitzgerald [00:40:12] Absolutely. Absolutely. And I think, you know, what's interesting to me is that. There's a language called the culture of poverty that often gets used when talking about African-Americans. And African-Americans at the time that the Irish came during the famine, were in slavery. And so no one was in any way hassling them because they were poor. They were supposed to be poor. They were slaves. The Irish were a group that were the origins of this kind of harassment because of presumably their culture of poverty. And it's only later that African-Americans, in being integrated into capitalism, start getting tagged as poor because of their cultural or moral inferiority rather than because of their status as slaves, for instance. So, yes, we do. We constantly use this and we use it for new immigrant groups and our capacity to see poverty over and over again as a moral and a cultural failing. It's not that this poor guy just broke his arm and can't pay the rent. And now he's on the sidewalk. It's that either drugs or drinking led him to this position. And the second part of that is that if we help them, it will exacerbate the problem. Instead of making it better for them by giving money, we make it worse. It tells me that we are devoted in a profound way to seeing poverty as a moral and a cultural issue rather than a systemic problem.

SFX: Music [00:41:53] [Leonard Cohen "Sisters of Mercy"] All the sisters of mercy, they are not departed or gone. They were waiting for me when I thought that I just can't go on. And they brought me there comfort and later they brought me this song. Oh, I hope you run into them. You who've been traveling so long.

Sarah McConnell [00:42:32] Maureen Fitzgerald is a professor of religious studies at William and Mary. She's the author of "Habits of Compassion: Irish Catholic Nuns and the Origins of New York's Welfare System."

SFX: Music [00:42:44] [MUSIC CONTINUED: Leonard Cohen "Sisters of Mercy"] Yes you who must leave everything that you cannot control. It begins with your family but soon it

comes 'round to your soul. We'll I've been where you're hanging, and I think I can see how you're pinned. When you're not feeling holy you're looking at things that you've sinned.

Sarah McConnell [00:43:24] Americans hold conflicting views on the vast numbers of unauthorized foreign workers in the labor force. But we've been in this situation many times before. Our next guest, Cindy Hahamovitch of the University of Georgia, is an expert on America's guest worker program.

Cindy Hahamovitch [00:43:43] Well, as the name suggests, guest workers are guests of the state. They are people who come on a temporary basis with a visa that allows them to work in the United States. They are today a tiny fraction of the U.S. labor force.

Sarah McConnell [00:44:00] The U.S. has always imported vast quantities of foreign labor, whether it started with slaves or indentured servants. We've relied on this for the kind of economy we have?

Cindy Hahamovitch [00:44:12] Yeah. There's nothing new about international labor migratio. As soon as there were borders. People cross those borders.

Sarah McConnell [00:44:19] Because you study the guest worker program. I think you'll have a little bit more global insight into how American firms use cheap labor. Where do you think the guest worker program belongs as the rest of us are feeling confused about illegal immigration and whether this is new and what we should do about it?

Cindy Hahamovitch [00:44:39] Yeah, it's a question that I began pondering a while ago when I was trying to figure out the origins of these things. And I found the first ones in South Africa and Prussia in the 1880s. Prussia in the 1880s was in some ways just like the U.S.. Now it had great big sort of factory farms and it was importing lots of Poles as cheap migrant labor that resulted in a human cry in Prussia about the Polinization of Prussia, just like we talk about the Latinization of the United States. Right to any Poles. Too many that the Slavic problem? Well, the result was the deportation of some 40,000 Poles in the mid 1880s. And that left these big plantation owners in a lurch. What were they going to do without the Poles? And it resulted in a compromise in 1890. They could have the Poles back as long as they came under certain terms. And these were the terms, only men could come, no women, the problem with women is that they reproduce. They had to have I.D. cards that identify them as Polish. They were not allowed to speak German and they couldn't hold meetings in Polish and they had to be cycled out at the end of the harvest. So they had to go back to Poland. And that really, I think, identified the essence of what guest worker programs have meant around the world in the years that would follow.

Sarah McConnell [00:46:06] So they always mean come, don't stay.

Cindy Hahamovitch [00:46:10] Exactly.

Sarah McConnell [00:46:10] Don't affect us. Come give us cheap labor and leave.

Cindy Hahamovitch [00:46:15] And that's essentially what they meant in the United States over the years. You take workers in their prime years, 18 to 40. They've been raised elsewhere. They've been educated elsewhere, if they've been educated at all. And you send them back when they're old, right? So you it's essentially a development program where the development aid comes our way instead of instead of going back the other way. Foreign workers around the world are feeding themselves, feeding their

families, providing money for their children's education, but they're also divided from their children. They're divided from their families. Half of those labor migrants around the world are women. So in some ways, we haven't worked out a very good solution to the problem of world poverty when we're telling people, all right, leave your children at home and go work in another country and stay apart from the people of that country. And you can't integrate there, but you can't go home until we're done with you.

Sarah McConnell [00:47:17] How is America's approach to guest workers different from that in France and Germany, for instance?

Cindy Hahamovitch [00:47:22] The difference is that in the U.S., guest workers from the West Indies and from Mexico came just into agriculture in the postwar period. So into our least well-paid, least unionized industry. And in Europe, in contrast, they went into every kind of industry, into agriculture, but also into metals, into auto, into construction. They went into highly unionized industries. And the unions there pretty quickly figured out that, well, if we can't keep them out, we better make sure that they don't undermine us. So we better get them what we have. And they did. So the conditions tended to go up in Europe and gradually guest workers got more and more rights. They got the right also to bring their families with them. They got the right of family reunification. And when those guest worker programs ended mostly by the 60s and then by the oil shocks in the early 70s, they tended to stay and to be able to keep their families with them. There were no deportation programs at the end, while when the U.S. program ended in 1964, those guest workers were expected to leave.

Sarah McConnell [00:48:32] Why did the oil shocks end those programs in Europe?

Cindy Hahamovitch [00:48:36] Well, the oil shocks battered both the U.S. and the European economies. And there were a lot of jobs lost and therefore there were less. There was less need for guest workers. But those oil shocks meant big business for the oil producing nations. And so you start to see demand for guest workers in those places. And you got just incredible demand for guest workers who come from South Asia, from India, from Pakistan, also from Korea, who are really kept in isolation in places like United Arab Emirates, in Kuwait, in Saudi Arabia, who are kept in barracks, who are not allowed to mingle with the native population, who have nothing in the way of labor rights.

Cindy Hahamovitch [00:49:19] We also have students, for example, in the U.S. who come in on cultural exchange visas. And there is somewhat of a racket in this in the United States. We get, for example, in Williamsburg College, students from Eastern Europe and from now Thailand who come in the summer and work at Busch Gardens and work at Pizza Hut and all sorts of restaurants along the main drag who aren't taking college courses in Williamsburg, but they're on student cultural exchange visas and they are paying essentially a commission to a recruiter and then are packed into hotel rooms while they're in the U.S. And then they're sometimes having to work an extra, sometimes two extra jobs in order to make enough money to save anything and take it back with them.

Sarah McConnell [00:50:09] We need a different way.

Cindy Hahamovitch [00:50:11] I think we do. I think we do. I think we certainly need if employers really need outside labor, we should at least need a nonprofit recruitment system instead of for profit recruiters who are sometimes raking two dollars an hour for every eight that these workers earn.

Sarah McConnell [00:50:37] Cindy Hahamovitch of the University of Georgia is an expert on America's guest worker program. Support for With Good Reason is provided by the University of Virginia health system. Pioneering treatments to save lives and preserve brain function for stroke patients. UVAHealth.com. With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities, which acknowledges the Monacan nation. The original people of the land and waters of her home in Charlottesville, Virginia. Our production team as Allison Quantz, Matt Darroch, Lauren Francis, and Jamal Milner. Our intern is Aidan Carroll. For the podcast go to with GoodReasonRadio.org. I'm Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening.