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HENTOFF: SWEET LAND OF LIBERTY Patience Mhlanga escapes Mugabe's killing machine

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A survivor of Robert Mugabe's relentlessly brutal dictatorship in Zimbabwe, Patience Mhlanga would like you to know what it was like to grow up in grinding fear there. She escaped, but her story tells what so many others are still undergoing in that hellhole that the rest of the world allows to continue:

"Growing up in Zimbabwe, I learned the meaning of persecution early. My father was a strong supporter of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), and the supporters of Robert Mugabe threatened to kill our family for my father's views.

"One night, while we were sleeping, Mugabe's supporters burned our house, our livestock, my father's store and all of our property. Without telling us where he was going, my father fled to Zambia, where he became a refugee."

Patience, her mother and three siblings "were given one day to leave or be killed."

Once in Harare, the capital city -- where her mother died "of an illness I cannot name to this very day" -- the rest of the family was helped by a Jesuit organization to find and join her father in a Zambian refugee camp. There, "I went for days without food, living on caterpillars and wild animals that my father caught for us.

"Education was provided for citizens (of Zambia), not refugees. The four years in the camp was with no education, so I found a way to teach myself. I wrote in the mud and used charcoal as a chalk for writing on the wooden board."

At last, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees chose her family to come to America for refugee resettlement. When Patience came here in 2006, she didn't know "a single word of English."

Determination should be Patience's middle name.

After two years in an English as a Second Language class, followed by a regular English class, she went on -- spurred by the principal of her school -- to enroll in an Advanced Placement English class, where some of the other students condescendingly called her "the girl with the little English."

Undaunted, Patience graduated from high school, no longer struggling with the language of what turned out to be her promised land. Having especially enjoyed working in the laboratory during her Advance Placement Chemistry class, Patience was off to college to major in chemistry.

Admitted on a full scholarship to Fairfield University in Connecticut, she's now a sophomore. I first heard about her from my sister, Janet Krauss, an English professor there. Janet is a teacher who does a lot more than lecture and grade exams; she gets to know each of her students. When Patience began to write the story of her life, Janet encouraged her.

I've spoken to Patience, wanting very much to send her story from sea to shining sea as an inspiration -- not only to students who came here as refugees, but to any student struggling to learn. She sent me her story as she wrote it.

Says Patience: "In every struggle I went through, I became a stronger person and was brave to face reality." She also learned to answer Duke Ellington's classic song, "What Am I Here For?"

She intends to become a doctor to be able to use her life experience "to help those unfortunate and who have no access to the medical doctor ...

"I also plan to build my own orphanage and simply help the needy."

Patience is already practicing her mission. While at Fairfield University, she has raised money for St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital. She also volunteered at a nursing home in Norwalk, Conn., through the Youth Health Service Corps, a program that recruits high school students interested in health care professions (www.swctahec.org/education/youth-health-service-corps). She also volunteered at a Bridgeport, Conn., soup kitchen.

At some risk to her health, Patience also went to southern India this past summer where, through the Indian Gospel Mission, she volunteered to live in the Pandur orphanage. Not only did she teach these children, she fed, bathed and played with them.

She misses them, adding, "I know why I have become a stronger person through my hardships. It is simply that I have a purpose. This is my life."

Meanwhile, back in heartless Mugabeland, Amnesty International reports: "Forced evictions in Zimbabwe leave thousands of children without access to education" (amnesty.org , 10/5/11).

In 2005, pretending to be concerned about deplorable conditions in certain communities, the Mugabe government carried out mass evictions to purportedly make a better life possible for those removed from their homes.

"Instead," says Michelle Kagari, Amnesty International's deputy Africa director, "the victims have been driven deeper into poverty, while denial (yes, denial!) of education means young people have no real prospect of extricating themselves from continuing destitution."

I commend Amnesty for caring, as usual, but Michelle Kagari goes on to demand: "Zimbabwean authorities must immediately use all available resources to adopt and

implement a national education strategy, which ensures that all children access free primary education."

As if the self-designated Hitler of Africa gives one damn about the ceaseless destitution of these children!

When Patience Mhlanga becomes a doctor, I'm sure she will deeply want to go back to Zimbabwe to educate as many children as she can. But she also knows that almost as soon as she sets foot there, she herself will likely be re-educated in the most gruesome form of Robert Mugabe's torture, or worse.

Only armed intervention will rescue the children of Zimbabwe. Who will be first?

Nat Hentoff is a nationally renowned authority on the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights. He is a member of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, and the **Cato Institute**, where he is a senior fellow.