



Refugees in the Shadows: A Viral Insights Column on War, Displacement, and Super-Survivors

by Chitra Ragavan · 20 Jun 2022 · 7 min read

Three months ago, I wrote this [piece](#) on SWAAY about the tragic forced migration of millions of Ukrainians, primarily women and children, in the wake of Russian President Vladimir Putin's unprovoked invasion of their sovereign homeland.

These urban refugees are fleeing across local, state, and national borders knowing their present has ended and that their future is a black box—uncertain, life-threatening, and unpredictable.

They're leaving behind their life's narratives and memories; their homes, their belongings; their husbands, brothers, and sons, who have stayed back to fight; their elderly parents, who watch as their cities—along with the history and monuments—turn to dust under the heat and weight of Russian firepower.

The Ukrainian refugees have rallied the world with their grit and resilience. Millions of people are watching their plight on the nightly news and asking, "What can we do to help?"

Meanwhile, in other countries, all forms of forced migration are raging unseen by much of the world. These are the shadow refugees—the nameless, faceless, super-survivors of war, famine, pestilence, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. Many are women and children who for one reason or another, fall through the safety nets of global bureaucracies.

Helping these shadow refugees is the passion of Sasha Chanoff, CEO and Founder of RefugePoint, the Boston, Massachusetts-based nonprofit organization that he created specifically to fill the gaping holes in the convoluted global bureaucracies that are attempting to tackle this pervasive problem through piecemeal solutions.



Sasha Chanoff, CEO & Founder, RefugePoint

A Life-Saving Solution

Case in point: Chanoff, one of the world's foremost refugee experts, said that the US government has a bipartisan resettlement program that is structured to bring in 75,000 refugees a year. However, he noticed that tens of thousands of those slots were going unused. "So here was a situation where there were many refugees falling through the cracks of assistance," Chanoff told me, "who needed resettlement as a life-saving solution."

In honor of World Refugee Day, I had the pleasure of having a deep conversation with Chanoff, on my leadership podcast, [When It Mattered](#). We talked about how RefugePoint is attempting to offer creative reforms in humanitarian aid to reach the shadow refugees, the women, the children, the lost and forgotten. We also discussed how the war in Ukraine is exacerbating the global humanitarian crisis.

The numbers are shocking. “Today, with the forced displacement and Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the world has topped 100 million people who have fled their homes,” notes Chanoff. “Among those, about 30 million have fled to a neighboring country and are considered refugees.”

Furthermore, global warming will likely make the problem worse, he says.

“I've seen some predictions and some modeling that indicates that there could be up to a billion people who are displaced by 2050,” Chanoff says. “So issues of refugees and forced displacement are no longer fringe issues. They impact every one of us and will continue to do so.”

Stuck Indefinitely

To most people, the word “refugee” indicates impermanence, a state of transition caused by undeserved cruelty and injustice and anchored by the hopes and dreams of normalcy, repatriation, and being made whole, someday. “But the fact is that people don't go home for an average of 20 or more years,” says Chanoff. “So once you flee your home, you might be stuck in a neighboring country indefinitely.”

For instance, Chanoff notes that in the [Dadaab Refugee Complex](#) in Kenya, there are more than 20,000 children whose grandparents arrived there from Somalia in the early 1990s.

“So there's generations being born into and living out their lives in refugee settings, in refugee camps,” says Chanoff. “And it's just unconscionable. I mean, the fact is that the whole humanitarian response system is predicated on the idea that people will go home.”

It's not just a human tragedy; it's also a global bottomline disaster. Every year, roughly \$30 billion is allocated for emergency aid, just to equip forced migrants with shelter, food, and basic services to help keep them alive, says Chanoff. But when days and weeks extend into years, even decades, Chanoff notes, “What you find is that people get shackled into lives of dependence without opportunities to support themselves, contribute to their communities, or move forward in productive and meaningful ways.”

Chanoff describes this phenomenon as “one of the greatest wastes of human potential you could ever imagine,” with vast consequences.

The Story of the Tent

Given that so many of these refugees are women and children, the risk of human trafficking is also immense.

In an story both heartbreaking and inspiring that reflects the complexity of these issues, Chanoff traces his calling and passion for humanitarian aid to an incident dating back to his first trip to the Congo 22 years ago with the goal and hope of bringing back 112 Tutsis who were on a UN resettlement list, per agreement with the Congolese government.

His boss had given Chanoff explicit orders not to attempt to bring back any more than those 112 refugees. But as he and his supervisor, Sheikha Ali, a veteran humanitarian aid operative, were about to leave, a refugee worker invited them into a tent.

At first Chanoff refused and urged Ali to also stay away, keeping his boss's instructions in mind—112 refugees, no more, no less. But Ali, in possession of both a heart of gold and a will of steel, was undeterred. She insisted on visiting the tent, Chanoff recalls. So he followed suit.

Chanoff says what he saw in that tent forever changed his life, turned a “crisis into a calling,” and led him to create RefugePoint.

I'll say no more, as Chanoff tells the story best, but simply urge you to listen to this wonderful episode of [When It Mattered](#) on this [episode](#) page, on your favorite [podcast platform](#), or here on [YouTube](#) to find out what Chanoff found in that tent and how it changed his life.

Crucible Moment

That “viral insight,” as I like to call it, or “crucible moment,” as Chanoff describes his epiphany in the tent, also led him to co-author with his dad, the well-known nonfiction writer, [David Chanoff](#), the leadership book, [From Crisis to Calling: Finding Your Moral Center in the Toughest Decisions](#). An Ashoka Fellow, Chanoff has won many awards and accolades for his extraordinary contributions to addressing the global refugee crisis.

For the tens of millions of refugees around the globe, World Refugee Day might simply mean another day of survival, a glass of water, a plate of food, somewhere to sleep. For the rest of us safe in our homes, it's an opportunity to give back, to give thanks for all the good in our lives, and to take inspiration and courage from these super-survivors.

Chanoff puts it best: “Look around. Open your eyes to the things that are happening around you. Are there other things that we could do there to help more people than just those on our list?”

If you like this conversation with Sasha Chanoff, do check out some of the other episodes from [When It Mattered](#) to hear great leaders describe the pivotal moments in their lives. You can also check out my technology podcast, [Techtopia](#), where I explore the many ways in which technology and innovation are changing the world, including combating human trafficking. You can find both podcasts on my new [YouTube](#) channel. Do subscribe, listen, and give us a thumbs-up!