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Voice of Witness: A Sudanese Refugee's Oral History

By Juliet Linderman for Voice of Witness
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In this interview, Felix Lohitai discusses his experiences as a South Sudanese refugee with Juliet Linderman for Voice of Witness. The Second Sudanese Civil War that initially displaced Lohitai and his family took place between 1983 and 2005. However, the Third Sudanese War, which is ongoing, continues to displace people of South Sudan. Today, South Sudan is the second largest source of refugees in the world. As you read, take notes on how Felix Lohitai's life has been impacted by his refugee status.

FELIX LOHITAI

Age when interviewed: 48

Born in: Rokon, Sudan

Interviewed in: Erie, Pennsylvania

Felix Lohitai is a Sudanese refugee who has been living in Erie for three years.¹ Since his arrival, he's become a pivotal figure in the Sudanese community, working closely with Habitat for Humanity to facilitate home ownership for refugees. Felix was born in Central Equatoria in South Sudan, and served in the rebel army for nine years before fleeing first to Uganda, then to Kenya.



["South Sudan: Growing violence deepens the humanitarian crisis across the country"](#) by European Commission DG ECHO is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

- [1] There is some confusion as to when I was born. 1964 was my year of birth, but of course refugees coming here don't have birth certificates because everything is lost. Everyone now says that the first of January is our date of birth.

Our tribes people were known as Langos in Sudan. I was born in Rokon in Central Equatoria, about fifty miles from Juba, the capital of South Sudan. But I lived in Eastern Equatoria for some time, because I traveled a lot with my father, who was a medical assistant. When I arrived in the United States I spoke five languages —Swahili, English, Kakua, Madi, and a little bit of Dinka.

The first war in Sudan, from 1955 to 1972, I remember only from my parents. The president came and made an agreement with the rebels² to give South Sudan regional autonomy.³ Even though the North is primarily

1. This interview took place in 2012.

Muslim and the South is primarily Christian, there are lots of Muslims in the South, and Christians in the North; but the South Sudanese didn't want to be considered Muslim. Then, in 1983, the president decided to forget the whole agreement, declared a state of emergency and declared Sharia Islamic Law in South Sudan. A couple of military leaders decided to rebel, and that was the beginning of the war — people were disappearing, and politicians were being detained, arrested, killed, or exiled.

In September 1984, when I was almost twenty years old, I joined the rebel army. At that time, security forces were everywhere and there was an impending conscription.⁴ If I didn't join the rebels, I would have been drafted and taken to the North to be trained to fight against my own people. So I joined. I was a private, and I trained two divisions of 12,000 men each — 24,000 men total. On September 21, 1986, I was promoted to second lieutenant and sent to war. It was all kinds of emotions — it's thrill, it's fear, it's courage, it's everything. I was part of the rebel army for nine years.

[5] In 1993, I left the struggle when internal fighting broke out among the South Sudanese rebels. Like many guerrilla⁵ movements, there was a disagreement about leadership and power. Whenever the leadership splits, you find yourself on one side, without really knowing what side is the right side. There were two options — leave Sudan immediately, or be ready to die. There were three main warring factions already in South Sudan, and if one of them told me to join and I refused, I would have been killed. And I didn't want to take up arms and fight against my own people. I decided to leave, to go back to school, and so I went into exile.⁶ By that time, I had a wife and three kids, and I sent them to Uganda first. A few months later, I laid my gun and my uniform on my bed one night and left.

I walked to Uganda, where the Red Cross⁷ took me to the Agojo refugee camp. My family had been staying in a church in Uganda because my wife's father was a minister in Sudan, considered a bishop or a "chairman," and I brought them to the camp. But at the time, northern Uganda had its own guerrilla movement, and the guerrillas were killing refugees. There was famine⁸ and violence, havoc and ambushes. I had seen a lot in my life and I wasn't afraid. But I was scared for my family, so we took an overnight train to Kenya because we heard that the U.S. government was resettling refugees there. The Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya was worse than the camp in Uganda. Refugees were confined to the arid⁹ areas in the north and northeast of Kenya, where there is a lot of drought and the temperature was often over 100 degrees. There were close to 3,000 Sudanese refugees in Kenya living in shacks. My family was given a tarp to make our shelter. Over time, we built walls using mud and sticks. But I knew that there would at least be opportunities in Kenya for education, and if I could go to school, I could better help my family.

While living in the Agojo camp, Felix had met Mary Mason, a Church of the Brethren missionary from the U.S. who was working in rebel-occupied areas of South Sudan. Felix and Mary became friends. Felix says she considered him her "African son," and he considered her his "American mother," and they often wrote letters to each other. After Felix's

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2. **Rebel (noun)** a person who resists or takes arms against a government or ruler
 3. the right or condition of self-government
 4. a law that requires someone to fight in a war if they are able
 5. a member of an unofficial military group that is trying to change the government
 6. **Exile (noun)** the state of forced absence from one's country, usually for political or disciplinary reasons
 7. an international humanitarian organization that provides care for the sick and wounded during war
 8. extreme lack of food
 9. having little or no rain

arrival in Kenya, Mary helped him apply for scholarships to universities in the U.S., for which he was granted admission but was unable to attend after being denied travel clearance. Mary then facilitated Felix's admission to a university in Nairobi, Kenya, and paid \$1,000 per semester for his education while his family stayed behind in Dadaab. In 1997, Mary was sent on a mission to Puerto Rico and the two of them lost touch. Felix returned to the refugee camp, unable to pay his own tuition. Then, in 1999, a pair of ministers called Phil and Louie Rieman contacted Felix. Mary had told them about Felix's situation, and they gave him the phone number of a top UNHCR¹⁰ official, instructing him to go to the UNHCR office the next day to discuss resettlement options. But in the months and years that followed, Felix's path to third-country resettlement would be repeatedly obstructed by unforeseen obstacles. At one point, his identity was stolen and used by another refugee to travel to New Zealand. After many false starts, he and his family eventually made their way to Erie.

On Louie's instructions, I went to the UNHCR office. I walked through the main door. Refugees are never allowed through that entrance, they have their own door. It was crowded with refugees and there were police everywhere — local Kenyans who would beat the hell out of anyone who misbehaved. In 1999, a UNHCR official interviewed me. At the time, New Zealand was accepting refugees, so she submitted my papers to the New Zealand Embassy.

After submitting my application, nothing happened. My family and I waited and waited for one year, until 2000, but we were never called, not even for an interview. The case for New Zealand just disappeared. I had friends in the United States who were pushing me to resettle in there. My friends had contacted a Joint Voluntary Agency, the JVA. The JVA worked with U.S. immigration to help resettle refugees. I was just a little person; they were big people in big offices, but they contacted me and I filled out the paperwork. My family had our first interview, and then our second, third, fourth, and finally we were accepted in 2001. Our itinerary was set. It was March 15, and we were ready to board a bus to the airport — I had my kids, my luggage, everything. Then, someone came from the International Organization for Migration, IOM, with a letter in hand. He asked me, "Are you Felix?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Felix, we want to see you in our office tomorrow. Your flight has been canceled." I felt like I'd been hit by a bus. If I were by myself it would have been no problem. But I was looking into the eyes of my kids and I just couldn't take it. My youngest was still in diapers, and my oldest was fourteen. Everyone was devastated. We had already given all our things away.

- [10] In the morning, I went to the IOM office and I was told that I must go to the U.S. embassy, that there was a problem with my name. They said someone with my name had already traveled to New Zealand. I knew nothing about this. I went to the office, and I contacted everyone I knew in the United States and had them write letters confirming that I was the true Felix. They wrote to senators, and the senators sent the INS letters. For two years I wrote the INS, one letter every week. I said, "This hand of mine, I will use this hand and this pen and I will get to the United States. If tonight my children go to bed with no food, I'll write it in the letter." Finally, in December 2003, I was called back to the INS. An officer there brought my file, full of letters — he had to wheel it — and he said, "You are indeed the real Felix, and you're determined to take your family to the United States. And you will."

Felix and his family were assigned to Grundy Center, Iowa, and in February 2003, they boarded a plane bound for the United States. Felix lived in Grundy Center for six months with his wife and children before moving to North Manchester, Indiana, where he enrolled in a peace and conflict studies university program. His wife and children eventually joined him there in 2005. When Felix graduated in 2009, he gave his wife the option of moving the family

10. The United Nations High Commissions for Refugees is a program that protects and supports refugees.

anywhere in the United States. She chose Erie: a small, quiet city with an African refugee community already in place.

When we got to Erie, we only knew one family. I saw a place where our community was not doing well, both in terms of assimilating¹¹ to American culture and preserving our own culture. I know some people living here who want to go back home. Some of them have been here twelve years and they are not citizens, because of the position of the community. But now we are talking about the importance of becoming a citizen, of changing the mentality of never being sure where you are or if you belong.

So we started having meetings. In the camps, we had a community helping us, but in Erie, parents go to work in plastic factories and when they come home they're tired, and they don't know what their kids are doing. They speak Arabic; they can't help their kids with their homework. What these kids get is total confusion. And some parents want their kids to behave like Sudanese, but when they go to school, they are taught to be like Americans, and American culture is totally different. The parents feel out of place with their children, and there is always conflict.

At the time, most Sudanese refugees were living in public housing. When you live in the projects, you don't feel that you are really a part of America. People live in the suburbs and come into Erie to work. Who is left actually living in the city? Minorities, in cheap housing in bad neighborhoods where children connect easily to the wrong people.

[15] I've seen a difference during the time I've been here, since we organized. We contacted the Habitat for Humanity office in Erie to talk about housing. We can't live in government housing forever. Do you think we're ever going back to our country? No. This is our country now. We live here. We need to own houses. Most of the Sudanese refugees in Erie are working in plastics and earning minimum wage. So I told Habitat for Humanity, "We have a problem," and they started working with us.

The first refugee in our community to buy a house was a medical doctor from Sudan. Now, he owns his house. Pretty soon there was another who bought a house. Now there are seven refugees who own their houses. Owning a home gives you confidence. If I'm renting, it's not my home, it's someone else's home; I can pack up and leave and disappear and no one will care. If I have a house here, I know that this is home; it's an incentive to integrate into American culture.

I thought I knew a lot about America before I came, but my research was shallow.

Many things surprised me. There are a few people controlling everything, and misleading everyone. Food policy, domestic policy, criminal justice — the fact that America has more incarcerated¹² people than China — those things disappoint me. Everyone has been affected by the economy. Without a job, you cannot feel stable, even Americans. But in this country, you can go as far as anyone can possibly go in education, and you can't do that anywhere else. I know with my education, I'll get a job somewhere.

This is my country now, and I will be a U.S. citizen. I will carry a U.S. passport. When I was first chosen to come here, one caseworker told me, "You are going to the United States. That is your country, and don't you ever,

11. **Assimilate** (*verb*) to conform to the customs, attitudes, and habits of a group or nation

12. **Incarcerate** (*verb*) to imprison someone

ever feel like a stranger." Everybody in America is a stranger when they first arrive. But in fifty years our grandchildren will be just like everyone else.

[20] *When we spoke to Felix at the end of 2014, he was thinking of moving from Erie. Budget cuts had led to his layoff from a job with United Way in 2013, and he still hadn't found work. He was especially interested in doing counseling work in an academic setting and he told us he was proud that both of his sons are in college. Felix obtained U.S. citizenship in 2013 and considered traveling back to South Sudan to work for an aid organization. But warfare between rival factions in the new country made that impossible. His brothers there warned him that former citizens who left and then came back were not looked on favorably. Felix wants to write about his experiences in Sudan, but other priorities come first. He tells us, "Many of us immigrants think we are so used to worrying, but in the U.S. we worry every day too, about bills, your landlord standing there demanding late fees, cars not running. It's wholly different from what we used to worry about."*

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