

## Blogging under African skies Published on October 21, 2007 Jewish Journal

On Oct. 13, 2007 three leaders of Jewish World Watch flew from Los Angeles to Africa for a two-week trip, with their ultimate destination the Sudanese eastern border refugee camps, Iridimi and Touloum in Chad. Jewish World Watch's Solar Cooker Project, led by Board President **Janice Kamenir-Reznik**, Executive Director **Tzivia Schwartz-Getzug** and Solar Cooker Project Director **Rachel Andres**, has raised \$850,000 to date, to provide self-sufficient and easy-to-use cookers to women in the camps so they don't have to put themselves in grave danger of rape or murder when they leave the camps to collect firewood. The Jewish Journal invited the three travelers to record diaries while on their journey, the first entry written by Kamenir-Reznik, an attorney, longtime activist and Jewish leader was written four days before departure. The rest were written throughout the trip.

### Anxious

**October 9, 2007 | Posted by Janice Kamenir-Reznik**

I was thinking today that exactly thirty years ago this week my husband and I, as young twenty-somethings, stood in a passport control and “welcome to the iron curtain” line at Moscow’s International Airport; we had dozens of Zionist and Judaic books and other such “subversive” documents sewn into the linings of our clothes and hidden in our bags. We carried a list of names of the thirty refuseniks with whom we were to make contact over the next ten days. I am not embarrassed to say, we were scared.

I have been thinking a lot about that experience 30 years ago as I anticipate my trip to see the Darfuri refugees at the Iridimi and Touloum refugee camps in Chad. Of course, there are major differences between that trip and the one we are about to take: for one, we are not bringing anything that could be considered contraband into Chad; second, the people who are the targets of our mission to Chad are not refuseniks who could easily have been (and maybe were) my actual cousins, or at the very least, fellow Jews; and finally, in the case of the Soviet Union, my husband’s parents and my grandparents were all born in the geography that we would be traversing; we were very aware of the fact that we could just as easily have been amongst those trapped behind the iron curtain as we were amongst those who were visiting with contraband and support.

But, with all of those differences, right now, for me, the similarities are more striking. First and foremost, these two trips are the two most “dangerous” things I have done in my life. Yesterday, Tzivia, Rachel and I were assured by a relief worker that Chad is no more dangerous than a walk through downtown L.A. (he didn’t say if the walk was in the daytime, nighttime, or what part of downtown...yikes!! Was this supposed be comforting?!?) But honestly, as an upper middle class Jewish daughter, wife, mom, attorney, community volunteer...raised in Pacific Palisades, and now hailing from Encino, I don’t usually find myself sneaking contraband into foreign countries, or, for that matter, booking travel to places which are rife with political instability, rebel armies, and refugee camps! We have always made a point of avoiding such situations....except twice...then... and now.

But, despite the twice daily calls from my very nervous octogenarian parents and in-laws who repeatedly assure me that they will not rest comfortably until we return safely from the trip, I do not feel scared about our physical safety. I do, however, feel anxious and am having a difficult time sleeping this week. My anxiety is related not to getting to the camps, but rather, to leaving the camps. I anticipate the misery of the people we will meet. I anticipate how sad and sorry and painful their stories will be. And, I anticipate that when we leave, to go back to our husbands, our children, our loving families, our beautiful homes

and our more or less orderly and predictable lives, the starkness of the contrast between the refugees and us will be overwhelming...and that will be very difficult and very painful.

When we left Anatoly Scharansky and Ida Nudel 30 years ago in their Moscow apartments, I remember that same feeling I anticipate now...profound sadness and fear for what would become of them. In that case, a week after we left, Anatoly was arrested, tried, and then taken to the Gulag where he spent years of his life in solitary confinement.

So, as I anticipate what the faces of genocide will look like when we encounter them next week, I want so much to be able to leave Chad feeling a sense of hope that one day they will be able to be restored to the life they and their families knew for so many hundreds of years....But...I also am frightened that I will find the face of hopelessness and dread. Will we know how to comfort the grieving mother? What will we tell her we can do for her? How do I explain that we care so deeply for her well-being? How do I tell her that we are trying to awaken our government and others to their plight...

## **How will I go? How will I return?**

**October 12, 2007 | Posted by Tzivia Schwartz Getzug**

How do you reassure your 7 year old that you WILL be safe, that you WILL return and that it's not SCARY to go a place like Chad, when you're not so sure yourself? As I've been focused on my never-ending packing list of water purification tablets and mosquito nets (we're not at DreamWorks anymore Toto!) I've been trying not to think about the reality of this trip. Maybe I shouldn't have watched "The Last King of Scotland" the other day or read the powerful story of the child soldiers in Africa. It's really been the nights, those long quiet periods over the past month when my thoughts go to the "what-ifs." And the thing that gets me is when well-meaning people say things like, "You're so brave to go there!" I want to scream at the top of my lungs, "I'm NOT brave so maybe I'm not the right one to go!" But I am.

The other thing that has me concerned is how this experience will affect my view of my own life in this city, in this community, when I return. How can one come back from seeing the kind of abject pain, poverty and injustice we will see and then return to driving carpool, listening to Radio Disney and mediating the never-ending battle over where we should go out to dinner? How will I be able to take the lessons learned and integrate them in a meaningful way, without judging or preaching to my family, my friends, my community?

This is a trip I never imagined I would take. I feel like I am being lead into a dark cave with absolutely no idea what or who is inside. I'm told this will be "life-changing," and I supposed any new experience has that potential. But since I have absolutely no frame of reference, I have to just be open to soaking it all in and seeing where I come out on the other end. And hopefully, I will have done something meaningful for me, my family and my community.

G-d Willing, tu, tu, tu.

## **Day 1: Arrival in Chad**

**October 14, 2007 | Posted by Janice, Rachel and Tzivia**

Hello JWW Friends,

It's Sunday evening and we have just arrived in N'Djamena, Chad! The almost 24 hours of flights went fine and we are settling in for the night before we go to various government entities tomorrow to get the permissions necessary to continue our travel to Abeche, and then on to Iriba and the Iridimi and Touloum camps.

We met up with Derk Rijks, the Solar Cooker Project founder, and with Gabrielle, a board member of Solar Cookers International, at the airport in Paris and flew here together. It's dark outside so it is hard to give you any impressions of the place right now. We will write again tomorrow and hope not to blow out another converter when we do so!

Signing off from N'Djamena,

Janice, Rachel and Tzivia

## **Day 2: In N'Djamena – Life Here is Incomprehensible**

**October 15, 2007 | Posted by Tzivia Schwartz Getzug**

I've driven my children down Skid Row at dusk so they can see the reality of life in Los Angeles for people not as privileged as we are. Today I was driven through the capital city of Chad and witnessed poverty and squalor to literally turn your stomach.

As we left the main road and turned into a dusty road along a watery river of trash, sewage and disease, we saw where the well-dressed hotel cleaning woman and the polite pool attendant go home every night. To say that life here is incomprehensible is a ridiculous understatement.

The average life expectancy here is 47 years old; I can tell you that I have not seen one older person anywhere! I am 45 years old and because of sheer luck or fate, I was born in Los Angeles, as were my husband and my children; and based on life-expectancy rates in the United States, I should have many more years of life to experience. But the children here, the smiling beautiful children in their school uniforms, waving to us on a street corner – what chance do they have? And will their lives be better or worse than those living in refugee camps we will visit this week on the eastern border with Sudan? Some say those refugee children are better off because they've got the world focused on providing for them. I don't know, but I think I understand what the words "G-d forsaken" really mean now.

### **Day 3: I'll never be the same**

**October 16, 2007 | Posted by Rachel Andres**

The most common comment I heard before we left LA was, "You'll never be the same. This experience will change your life forever." At that time I didn't know what they meant exactly, and surely I didn't think it would happen the first day of our journey.

But I think it has.

While "touring" the capital city of Chad, N'Djamena, Derk wanted to give a message to someone who happens to live in the poorest section of town. We were dropped off by Ali Mousa, the logistics manager for the Solar Cooker Project (Tchad Solaire) and our driver while we are here. We walked along an endless river of garbage: plastic bags, trash, bugs, empty containers, a few goats roaming, small fires burning... words can't describe the smell and sight. On one side of us was the garbage with children walking across it and even wading into it, and on the other side were dung huts where families live in 10 x 10 hovels. There were a few children roaming about, some barefoot, as well as a woman braiding another woman's hair, a skinny dog sniffing around for something to eat and, finally, the home of Martine.

Martine is a beautiful, poised, sweet woman who was so gracious and pleased to see us. It was putting this beautiful face and sweet personality to the reality of this slum-like living that was completely devastating. The realization that people were living, literally, on top of this trash dump hurt to the core of my being.

This country and its people are supposed to be in good shape compared to Sudan... and we haven't even arrived at the refugee camp yet.

All is well with our crew. A driver met us at the hotel at 5:45 AM. "Driver" sounds fancy... picture a small Land Rover with all of our luggage and the 5 of us plus the driver crammed in! We then flew on a 20 seat World Food Programme plane to Abeche, our next stop on the way to Iriba and the camps. The pilot looked about 20, but she did a beautiful job. Apparently these are the best pilots because they fly so much. No bathroom on the plane but luckily there was air conditioning!

We fly tomorrow to Iriba and, if all goes according to plan (not so common in Africa apparently), we will be in the refugee camp on Thursday. More then.

### **Day 3: Waiting**

**October 16, 2007 | Posted by Janice Kamenir-Reznik**

Waiting...waiting...waiting. It seems like 90% of the time we have spent since arriving in Chad has been spent waiting. In the first 24 hours in N'Djamena our waiting time was split between the American Embassy, with whom we needed to register our presence in Chad, and the UNHCR, which was the designated agency to procure for us our office Permission to Circulate within the country. At the UNHCR, the person in charge of obtaining our Permission to Circulate met our request with a look that said something like, "you can't possibly expect me to get this done for you this week, can you???" She explained that there were many people in line before us, that everyone but her was on vacation and that she was soon to be taking her lunch break. She had absolutely no intention of getting to our papers that day.

As we wandered around the UNHCR compound we met a young worker with whom Rachel had communicated over the past couple of months about a box of our JWW potholders, which we had shipped to Iridimi from LA but which were “MIA.” We mentioned our Permission to Circulate, and somehow I think he helped push the paper work along. After 9 hours, our Permission papers were ready. Such a feat! Keep in mind, we already had VISAS issued by Chad in the US; why would we come to Chad if not to circulate in the country?

The next morning (this AM for us) we awoke at 5:15 AM and waited 3 hours until our UN plane was ready to leave for Abeche. Now, we have been Abeche ALL day, basically secluded in the UN complex, waiting first to get yet another set of Permission papers and then waiting for tomorrow morning’s flight to Iriba.

We also had to wait for water to be delivered to be able to go to the bathroom.

And, we waited for the temperature to cool down from what felt to me like 150 degrees.

And, while we were waiting for it, we were just informed that there is a curfew due to some violence in a refugee camp a few hours drive from here.

So, we are about to be driven to this very odd room in which we will be spending the night – it is not in the UN compound, as all of the rooms were full. It is all very surreal and I feel very, very far away from home.

## **Day 4: Abeche, Iriba and Happy Accidents**

### **October 17, 2007 | Posted by Janice Kamenir-Reznik**

It’s hard to believe it, but today, 4 days after leaving Los Angeles, we finally arrived at our destination – Iriba. The town is home to somewhere between 3,000 and 6,000 people (there is no census so no one knows the population for sure). Of course, there are only a couple of dirt “roads” and all of the people live in small mud houses.

But first, a word about yesterday. While in Abeche, we had a wonderful meeting with the UNHCR manager who is responsible for refugee camp programs in Eastern Chad. There are more than a dozen camps housing some 250,000 refugees in Eastern Chad. The UNHCR Eastern Chad Camp Manager expressed her support of the Solar Cooker Project and asked that the project be expanded in 2008 to 3 more camps in another part of Eastern Chad. This was very encouraging. Like others with whom we have met, she explained the complexity of the political situation in Chad, specifically about the enormous shortage of firewood and the tensions and violence caused by that shortage.

Today, we began our series of meetings with our partners. We met our partners who actually operate the Solar Cooker Project in Iridimi. They are amazing people who are so grateful for the support we have given to the project. We delivered a shipment of our beautiful potholders, which they love. They said that the women in the camp are asking for potholders, and we were very happy to bring a fresh supply to them.

We also had a meeting with the “governor” of this region of Chad. It was definitely a surreal event about which we will report more when we are no longer in Chad.

In the last couple of days we, quite by accident, met representatives from two of the other projects which JWW has funded—we met a man who works for HIAS ( the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, through whom we funded a social worker in the Goz Amir camp in Southern Chad), and we met the representative from Internews (through whom we are funding “She Speaks, She Listens”, a women’s education and empowerment radio project). We have also seen the major presence of International Medical Corps and the International Rescue Committee—two other organizations to which JWW has made major financial donations. It is so great to see the dollars we have raised actually bringing some modicum of service and relief to this area.

Tomorrow we go to the camp to begin our evaluation.

## **Arriving in Iriba**

**October 17, 2007 | Posted by Tzivia Schwartz Getzug**

Today we arrived in Iriba. Having “slept” last night in Abeche, we woke early to catch the UN flight to Iriba. The 12-seater plane carried our team, which now includes Daniel Roger Tam, from the UNHCR Environmental Unit, as well as a representative of Internews. Internews is our partner with Equal Access for our new “She Speaks, She Listens” radio project (Ask us about it!). The Internews Program Director was on our plane and knew Jewish World Watch and that we were his funders! Now that is a “small world!”

As we flew from Abeche to Iriba we had a birds-eye view of the landscape, spotting the intricate wadi systems, the inactive volcanic craters, small settlements of 20-30 households and then, as we approached Iriba, we were finally able to see the Iridmi camp on the left side of the plane and, in the distance, the Touloum camp to the right. After being so intimately involved in these camps for so long, having never seen or visited them, we were thrilled to finally be here. Tomorrow we will begin our visits.

In the meantime, we had several very interesting and informative meetings with the entire evaluation team. We received a security briefing with the UNHCR head in Iriba, Emmanuel, and were then joined by the number 2 in charge at UNHCR in Abeche, Florent, and Regional Delegate of the Chadian Ministry of Environment, Quality of Life and National Parks, Nelngar Younane. Later we will also be joined by CARE International, Bureau Consult International, and Commission Nationale D’Assistance aux Refugies.

We have already heard from the UNHCR reps how much they and the refugees believe in the Solar Cooker Project and believe that it is helping to reduce the amount of firewood needed by the women for cooking, thereby helping to reduce their risk of rape or attack. We are looking forward to speaking with the women themselves and hearing it directly from them over the next 5 days.

## Day 5: Iridimi Camp – An Incredible Day

### October 18, 2007 | Posted by Rachel Andres

What an incredible day! A UN convoy escorted us to the refugee camp today – finally! (Picture this: a truckload of armed guards in the back of an open pick-up truck, followed by 6 Land Rovers loaded with people ready for a day of work at the camp.)

In May 2006 when JWW kicked off its support of the Solar Cooker Project and “adopted” the Iridimi refugee camp, I didn’t really believe we could outfit the 5000 families with solar cookers so fast, and I surely didn’t envision visiting the camp in eastern Chad. So arriving today was an unanticipated experience in more ways than one.

After having our “Permission to Circulate” papers checked, we went straight to the solar cooker workshop, where we were enthusiastically (to say the least!) greeted by the 15 or so women who work so diligently making the cookers. After hand shakes, hugs, smiles and a few photos, the work began. The women busily took their positions and suddenly the room turned into a serious manufacturing plant. Two women traced the cooker pattern with ball point pens and carefully cut out the cookers; two other women brushed gum arabic (glue) on the cardboard and smoothed the large pieces of foil onto them; and a seamstress sewed fabric into carrying bags to protect the cookers. Outside on the ground, one woman squatted while she stirred gum Arabic crystals in water to melt them with her bare hands (for hours), and the other hammered holes in the cookers in order to place eyelets (a recent improvement to the cookers, which helps steady them on windy days by attaching rocks to a string that is placed through the eyelets).

In the small, neat storage room we saw laminated photos of kids from LA decorating potholders; stacks of cardboard, cookers in carrying bags, fabric and other supplies. The women were so proud to show us all they had accomplished. And I felt a deep pride for the commitment of thousands of people in the US who have supported the project; people who have heard of these very women and have chosen to help them.

At the same time, my pride was mixed with overwhelming emotion for how much has been lost and how difficult the lives of my new “sisters” (as they call us) really are.

And then there are the children: when I spoke via satellite phone with my son Ezra today, he said, “I checked the website and you haven’t written anything in a few days.” Contrast a 10 year old in LA checking on his mom via the world wide web with the children I saw today: dozens of children, dressed in rags and 3 lone toys. One toy looked like the plastic top of a gasoline can that a 2 year old girl sucked on during the evaluation interview with her family, a rickety bicycle wheel provided entertainment for a young boy who pushed it through the sand; and a toy car made of aluminum soda cans amused another little boy. I couldn’t help but think of all the material items we and our children have and the different lives we lead.

Just as my dreams have come true in coming here to see this project to fruition, here’s hoping the refugees’ dream of going back to their homes in a safe and secure Darfur happens soon... or at least within our lifetime.

## Day 5: Dignity and Kindness

October 18, 2007 | Posted by Tzivia Schwartz Getzug

Today we visited the Iridimi refugee camp, where our Solar Cooker Project was launched 18 months ago. The sense of being, literally, a world away, finally holding the hands of the women working to manufacture the solar cookers and speaking with the Sudanese refugees about how our project has impacted their lives for the better is something I will never forget.

Iridimi itself reminds me of how I picture the “neighborhood” where our ancient Israelite ancestors lived in Egypt. Low mud-brick buildings, some thatched-roofs, little vegetation and roaming donkeys – truly a Biblical scene resulting from contemporary inhuman behavior.

Our goal today was to see the manufacturing workshop, meet the women who work there and then begin to interview random families throughout the camp who are using our solar cookers. We want to know if the use of the solar cookers is truly impacting their need for firewood, which is so scarce and a source of great tension with the local Chadian population. It is clear that the issue of scarcity of resources, water and firewood, is THE issue for the refugees, as well as for the entire country.

We began our day with an incredible meeting – we were ushered into a room of 20 “elders” of the camp, sitting on mats, dressed in long white gowns and tall turbans. These are the leaders of the Iridimi camps and they were invited to meet with us to discuss the project. I have to say that I was terribly intimidated by this group, as I’m sure they have never seen 3 white Jewish women from Los Angeles (who, while trying to dress appropriately for our guests ended up looking like Golde, Tzeitel and Hava!), let alone engaged in peer-to-peer conversation with them! But they were gracious, respectful and expressed extreme gratitude for the work we have done for their benefit and for the benefit of their families.

The other surprising thing was their willingness to listen to our “moderator,” Marie Rose, who with Derk Rijks, founder of the Solar Cooker Project, now heads Tchad Solaire, the local organization formed to run the project. Just as we watched these men “shoo” the 3 women leaders of the camps to the back of the room, they listened as Marie Rose led the 2-hour long discussion, answered their questions and engaged them in sometimes difficult conversation. Finally, we 3 Jewish feminists took great pride and pleasure in witnessing the young Madame La Presidents des Refugies speak up from behind the rows of men and express her opinions about the usefulness of the project, and her disagreement with some of the opinions expressed by the men. I believe we are witnessing a real cultural change, both in terms of empowerment of women in this society, as well as a grudging acceptance by the men. But isn’t that just history repeating itself?

My last thought is about kindness. As I sat on the dirt floor of 2 different “homes” this afternoon, I witnessed a kind of dignity and kindness that I will never forget. How do people who have lost so much – family, community and property – continue to offer to the stranger who enters their home whatever little food or shelter they have? Without a second thought to their own needs, these participants in our evaluations opened their homes to us, provided us with food and drink and gave us entry into their lives. I hope and pray that this, among others lessons learned here today, will stay with me for as long as I live.

## **Day 6: The Similarities are More Glaring than the Differences**

**October 19, 2007 | Posted by Janice Kamenir-Reznik**

Today we continued with the evaluations of the Solar Cooker Project inside the Iridimi camp. At the end of each 30-minute interview related to each woman's solar cooker practices, we asked if she would mind sharing her personal story about what had brought her to the Iridimi refugee camp. Each of the women we interviewed told us about the bombardments of their villages, and their horrible personal losses. One of the women told us that 3 children were killed in her family; she then pointed at a woman across the courtyard of the small compound and told me that the woman's mother was killed in the same way. At the end of the conversation we offered them our condolences and our hope for peace for them and their families; their response was to bless us for caring about them and for bringing solar cooking to their lives.

In the first two days of the field work, we have visited around 35 households. By the end of the process, if all goes according to plan, we will have met with 100 households. Almost without exception, the women tell us that solar cooking has played a very important role in minimizing the need to leave the camp for firewood. They are very grateful and loving to us.

One of the most emotional aspects of the visit to the camp for me is the TOTAL lack of material culture. We have seen hundreds and hundreds of children. We have not seen a single toy or a single unnecessary object. Food is obviously very scarce, and despite 10 or so hours we have spent so far in the camps, I have never seen a child eating anything or playing with anything. The contrast not only to our own lifestyle (obviously), but to any lifestyle I have ever personally observed anywhere in my life shakes me to my core.

Then, despite these shocking disparities, I think of my husband's parents and all of those who survived the Holocaust, and I think of the conditions in which they lived in the concentration camps and death camps and ghettos. And then, I look at the women in the camp as if they truly are family, for the similarities end up being far more glaring than differences.

## Laughs

**October 19, 2007 | Posted by Rachel Andres**

My friend Monica wrote me a sweet note before I left. In it, she said to think of her “when there are laughs, and there are bound to be some.” Not only have there been periodic laughs, there have been many. How lucky I have been to travel here with Tzivia and Janice. They are two of the brightest, most competent and interesting women I know – and they are funny! From the first night in N’Djamena after 24 hours of travel when Tzivia, Janice and I were dodging locusts that were so big they made infamously huge Texas cockroaches look like ants, to laughing at ourselves as we looked ready to break out in “Matchmaker, Matchmaker” yesterday as we left for our first day at the camp dressed “modestly” to be respectful of the women here. And even at the camp, amidst the hunger, thirst and deep sadness carried by the refugees... even there we found humor!

In a meeting with the Iridimi Leadership Council (picture two dozen Muslim men in traditional garb sitting on the floor staring at us), we found humor as well. Although we had entered the “tent of the meeting” for what we thought was more or less a required formality before we would start the interviews in the camp, the discussion turned out to be a serious and frank conversation about solar cookers. I was prepared to hear the resistance of the men to the solar cooker project; the main criticism I have heard about solar cookers is that the men don’t like the way the food tastes. Their mothers and grandmothers cooked over wood fires and they want their wives to do the same, I’d been told (reminds me of the old story of the man who wanted his wife’s matzo balls to taste just like his mother’s — rock hard!). We may be half way around the world, but some things are the same. Or are they?

One man volunteered that the food tastes good and that it is so good that sometimes the children steal some out of the pot if it is not watched. Pleasantly surprised, the men talked of how they like solar cooking because now the women are safer, since they don’t have to go out for firewood (also a woman’s job), and that now the women have more time for other things. The only complaint was that solar cooking takes longer. The 3 women sitting to the side sat up when they heard that. One was the President of the women refugees. She said, “We are the ones who cook and we don’t mind. Now we have more time to do things we like, like henna!” (Think: time to go to the spa!) The women laughed, as did the men and the rest of us.

The men spoke of how now their wives have acquired a new skill and in turn their daughters have, so when they return to Darfur, they will bring with them this new knowledge to share.

We had discussion about the new project JWW just funded, a water reclamation project. The “grey” water is collected at the bottom of the shower and through a tube goes into a small garden for each family. Test cases have begun and the goal is to further introduce this throughout the camp. The men spoke of concerns about water and worries that eating vegetables with shower water would make them sick. Finally, one man said, “In Africa men and women sleep together at night and in the morning they take showers. It is a sin to use that water to grow vegetables”. The whole room broke up in laughter! The women to the side were embarrassed and laughing. The men were all laughing and within seconds (just long enough for the translation) we were belly laughing together. Humor... the universal survival skill. Jews know this well. Cleary, so do Darfurians.

## Day 6: Look What You've Done!

October 19, 2007 | Posted by Tzivia Schwartz Getzug

My thoughts today are focused on Janice and Rachel. Today was our second day visiting the Iridimi refugee camp in eastern Chad. Refugee camp! In eastern Chad! I had to stop every once in a while and repeat that sentence to myself today as we sat in the “homes” (mud brick hovels) of 5 different families as we heard stories of how using solar cookers has made their lives safer and more secure.

And I can't stop looking at Janice. And whispering to her, “Look what you've done!” As you all know, Rabbi Harold Schulweis had an incredible vision for an organization that would awaken the hearts and minds of our synagogue community to the genocides happening now, to “other people” around the world. And he tapped Janice to co-found that organization with him. Not only did she co-found it – but she ran it out of her home for more than 2 years and built it into the 56-synagogue strong coalition it now represents. In addition to educating the community and advocating to stop the genocide in Darfur, JWW has built medical clinics and water wells, funded trauma counselors and political mediators – everything geared toward humanitarian assistance for the refugees. Eighteen months ago Janice and the JWW Women's Committee decided to try to do something to try to prevent the rape and attacks against the refugee women who had to leave the relative safety of the refugee camps to look for firewood for cooking. They discovered a small pilot project in the Iridimi, run by Derk Rijks, to outfit the camp with solar cookers. The idea is so simple – reduce the amount of wood the women need, thereby reducing the number of trips outside the camp they must make, and thereby reducing their risk of attack or rape. And do it cheaply, with cardboard and aluminum foil.

Janice then hired the indefatigable Rachel Andres to research and implement the Solar Cooker Project. And the rest is history... well, almost. Not only have we received incredibly positive feedback about the SCP project during this visit to Chad from the UN High Commission on Refugees, the Chadian government, and other NGO's, but the refugees themselves are telling us that this has made a huge difference in their lives, and in the lives of the daughters and granddaughters. And because of the scarcity of wood throughout eastern Chad, the UNHCR is talking about ways to expand this project to other camps as well.

I have believed in this organization from the start, and certainly would not have taken on the position as Executive Director almost a year ago if I did not think it was doing incredible work in our Jewish community for the benefit of others. As we walked through zone after zone in the refugee camp we spotted steaming pots of rice, beans and tea cooking on solar cookers in almost every courtyard. And, in the home of one of the women whose afternoon meal was cooking nearby in a solar cooker, I sat with Janice and Rachel and listened to the woman thank us for giving her and her daughters their safety back, after all they have been through in Darfur. I have never been more proud and more inspired to be in the company of my friends and colleagues, the founder of Jewish World Watch and the Director of the JWW Solar Cooker Project respectfully, Janice Kamenir-Reznik and Rachel Andres.

## Day 7: Bearing Witness

October 20, 2007 | Posted by Rachel Andres

Bearing Witness. What does it really mean to bear witness? Having been here in the Iridimi refugee camp now for several days, it seems to me that “bearing witness” takes on new meaning. As we visit with these women and question them about their solar cooker training, their usage of the cooker, the results when the food is cooked, and the follow-up assistance if they have problems with the cooker, we have ended the interview with a question about their personal story... how they came to live in the refugee camp, to bear witness.

Of course we know from news reports of the atrocities being committed in Darfur over the past few years, but we are sitting now, face to face, asking the question. A few women chuckled nervously as they began their story, each telling of their village being bombed and the Janjaweed militia coming by truck and attacking their families, raping the women, stealing their belongings and burning their villages. Each told of family members being killed. One woman had six children; four were killed the first day during the bombings the other two children killed the following day. A man came outside of his tent as we walked by to tell us that he uses the solar cooker to cook his meals. He was the first man who talked of cooking. His wife and children were all killed in Darfur. He is alone now.

I woke up this morning and wrote the above entry but with no time, left it unfinished.

And now that we have just returned from the camp, I write with a heavier heart. We went to a different camp today, the Touloum camp, where the Solar Cooker Project has recently begun. JWW funded the construction of a manufacturing plant and storage room and are now funding the manufacturing of the cookers and the training for the women. After touring the camp, visiting the Doctors Without Borders compound, walking through the different zones, witnessing solar cooking taking place, taking photos of and with the kids (everyone loves having their pictures taken...), we came back to the solar cooker workshop to meet the women who work in the project and to talk with them. After the initial introductions and welcome, it seemed clear that this would be short conversation. The women expressed that what happened to them and their families was too painful to discuss. We said we understood and told them that our hearts are with them. We thought that would be the end of the conversation, that we would thank them for all their work to make the solar cooker project successful and give them all the t-shirts and bracelets that we brought for them as gifts. They thanked us for coming such a far distance to be with them. Then the subject of our long airplane ride came up.

Suddenly the topic of airplanes sparked horrific memories for the women. They began to speak of the bombings and the attacks. One woman, Zanuba, opened up and told us stories of torture and pain I would like to forget, but never will.

People have said it is our job to bear witness. We have spent days talking about the positive impact the Solar Cooker Project has had on the lives of these refugees. Now, hearing the stories of the women’s suffering in Darfur first hand, I feel that I have become a witness to their pain and must begin the work of telling their story.

## Day 7: I'm Convinced

October 20, 2007 | Posted by Tzivia Schwartz Getzug

This was our last day in the Iridimi refugee camp ALREADY. Clearly it is not enough time to develop real relationships with the people there, but I do feel that we have touched their lives in a very important way – by helping them feel more secure, more safe.

I participated in one of four teams that has met with more than 50 families so far (hundreds of people), and will continue to meet with families next week after Janice, Rachel and I leave. I can tell you unequivocally that I am convinced more than ever of the positive impact the solar cooker project has made on the lives of the women. To a family, we have heard over and over that using the solar cooker, in combination with a fuel efficient stove, has almost completely eliminated the need for most to go out of the camp to look for firewood. And to a family, most had experienced rape or some form of violence when searching for firewood previously. This was the goal of the solar cooker project and we are so thrilled to hear from the mouths of the refugees themselves that we are really helping to keep them safe! And of course, we have heard from the refugees, over and over in the last few days, about horrible losses each and every family has suffered during the aerial bombardments of their villages by the Sudanese government and vicious attacks by the Janjaweed militiamen. Helping these gentle, modest people feel a bit more secure in their lives is the least we can do.

There's one other point that was particularly meaningful to me today. There have been some skeptics about the use of solar cookers, in particular because of the belief that one cannot cook the mainstay of the refugee diet, boule, a pasty millet porridge served with a tomato based sauce. So, when we arrived at the camp this morning, the women offered to put up a pot of boule in the solar cooker so we could see for ourselves. Two hours and 10 minutes later, we returned to the workshop and . . . the boule and its accompanying sauce were done! While it took more time than cooking it over a fire, it does not require constant stirring and allows the women to walk away from the pot and do other things in the meantime. Janice and I decided we would be the first to put our hands in the pot (another in our constant quest to avoid sharing germs with others, of course!) and tasted the boule. Janice immediately exclaimed that it tasted like her mother-in-law's "plutzkele" (like eastern European homemade gnocchi) and I shouted out the only Zaghawa word I've learned, "tamam!" (good). It was polenta-like and tasted really good. (You can see me giving it a thumbs-up in our photos from today!)

It was pretty cool to try the local food of the refugees because, obviously, it is nothing I would have ever had an opportunity to do otherwise. But even better is knowing that, with a bit of education, more and more of the refugees will learn that they can depend on their solar cookers for more of their families' meals and this, in turn, will lead to more support from the NGO (non-governmental organizations) community as well. I'm so proud to be associated with this project and to know these brave Darfuri people.

## Day 8: Today, We Cried

October 20, 2007 | Posted by Tzivia Schwartz Getzug

Man's inhumanity to man is limited only by the creativity of his cruelty.

Today we cried. We have sat with small and large groups of Darfuri refugees for the last several days and talked about solar cooking, with the details of the horrors that brought us together silently hanging in the air. Today, however, we looked into the sad dark eyes of our refugee sisters and listened to their tales of horror.

Zanuba is 25 years old. She is a beautiful young woman with three small children who has aspirations to come to America. She has been living in the Touloum refugee camp for two years. When her village was attacked by aerial bombing and then by the Janjaweed militia, they ran. Many were able to get to the nearby wadi (a dry riverbed), but many more were killed, including a woman who had gone into labor with twins and could not run. The men were primary targets, so they tried to hide by wrapping themselves in scarves like the women – but the Janjaweed forced everyone to remove their head coverings and killed the men on the spot. Many young women were tied up and raped until they died. Other women were put into trees that were lit on fire until they divulged the whereabouts of their men. And in one of the most gruesome stories I have ever heard, the Janjaweed decapitated several people and used the heads to form a “three stone fire.”

As Zanuba shared her painful story and the stories of the other women in the room, tears streamed down our faces. I was overwhelmed, not only by their suffering and loss, but by the ability of human beings to use their superior abilities to inflict unspeakable and evil acts on one another.

As we spent our last night in Iriba thinking about all we had seen and heard, one of our UNHCR colleagues asked me if I felt this experience had “changed me.” I’m quite convinced that the personal impact of this visit will continue to unfold in the weeks and months to come, but my initial response is OF COURSE. How can I go back to my life, my hectic, wonderful life without hearing the voice of Zanuba in my head? How can I go to Bloomingdales (I feel ridiculous even writing the word sitting here in Chad!) without remembering the pathetic “marketplace” in the middle of the Touloum refugee camp? I know it won’t stop me from buying a new, but probably unnecessary pair of shoes, but I hope that it will give me a new context in which to think about my everyday life and renewed energy towards this work and the work by done by others who are helping those in need.

I also wonder how I can possibly share, in a meaningful way, these lessons with my children? Do they translate? Do you have to “see it to believe it?” And is such extreme trauma comprehensible for a child? Probably not. G-d willing I will have many years ahead to absorb and share these important lessons.

## Day 8: Boundless Capacity

October 21, 2007 | Posted by Janice Kamenir-Reznik

Today we had the most intense experience we have had to date. We went to the Touloum refugee camp to see the expansion of the Solar Cooker Project. We were escorted by a truckload of armed police to Touloum. As we approached the outskirts of the camp we saw a caravan of donkeys and refugees leaving to collect firewood. Within the camp we saw many people carrying wood as well—much more so than we did at the Iridimi camp. Since the Solar Cooker Project is so new to the Touloum camp, this did not surprise any of us. In fact we were far more surprised at seeing solar cookers operating in many of the houses!! But, that was not what made the day so emotionally intense.

We had asked to meet with a group of women who would be willing to sit with us and talk to us for a while. Either Derk or Marie-Rose arranged for us to meet with the “artisans”, the women who work in the solar cooker “atelier”. Around 10 refugee women joined us at the “atelier;” Marie-Rose, Patillet, Justin, Naomi and Derk from Tchad Solaire (SCP) were also there.

The conversation started with them telling us how much they love solar cooking and how they feel that solar cooking has contributed to their safety and security. We then told them that we were there representing thousands of Jewish people. They did not really know about the Jewish people, but they seemed to know about the people of Israel and they seemed to have some inkling about the suffering of the people of Israel. We then asked them if they would be willing to share their own personal stories of how they came to be at the Touloum refugee camp. At first they said that they couldn't share these stories in public and they declined to speak about it. But then, not more than one minute later, a young 25 year old mother of 3, Zinuba, began to tell us the most heart wrenching and gruesome stories of the horrendous treatment of the Darfurian women at the hands of the Janjaweed. The crimes committed against the women with whom we were meeting and against their now deceased daughters, sisters and mothers were unspeakable. And yet, they were being spoken to us. Now. Here.

As we all sat and cried together, I was completely overwhelmed. Overwhelmed by the suffering that the women had endured. Overwhelmed by the fact that Tzivia, Rachel and I are here, sitting in front of the women in the Touloum refugee camp near the Darfur border, listening to their stories and crying with them.

Above all, I was yet again overwhelmed by the boundless capacity of human beings. The capacity of humans to commit unspeakable evil, and the countervailing capacity for healing. The capacity for those exposed to the greatest of evils on our planet to be able to regain their trust in people. The capacity for survivors of horrific cruelty to be able to laugh again. The capacity of women, who have watched their daughters tortured and murdered in front of their eyes, to give birth again to new life. The capacity of people who live in a god-forsaken place to feel hopeful about tomorrow.

Once again, the differences between us dissolve and we find ourselves sitting with our sisters, sharing our prayers for peace.

## Re-entry

October 27, 2007 | Posted by Janice, Tzivia and Rachel

After three days of travel within Chad, some of which got a bit dicey, we finally boarded the Air France plane which would take us home. We were very happy that we had made it through this harrowing experience and very excited to be going back to the US and to our loving families and community. At the same time, we share an overwhelming sense of sorrow for the refugees and for the horrific tragedies they have experienced; a sadness that we might never see the people we met again, and that it might be years (or forever) before they can go back to their country to begin rebuilding their lives.

We have been home for 24 hours. While our sadness persists, (and lingering nausea plagues our innards) we also feel a growing sense of amazement and pride at the positive impact our JWW projects have had on the refugees.

The Solar Cooker Project has played a vital role at the Iridimi camp in decreasing dependence upon firewood. While the evaluation report is not yet complete, there is no question in our minds, after speaking with hundreds of refugees at Iridimi, that the project is successful. It has reduced the need for firewood so significantly that there is little or no need to search for firewood outside the camp and risk assault. The increased safety and security of the women is beyond our original hopes and expectations.

While this trip focused on evaluating the Solar Cooker Project, our experience there spoke volumes about the importance of our other JWW funded projects in other refugee camps. We saw firsthand evidence of the critical importance of our work to build medical clinics, to support a psycho-social counselor for trauma victims, and to expand the "She Speaks, She Listens" radio program that educates and empowers women, particularly about gender-based violence issues.

And, having seen the thousands of children at Iridimi and Touloum and their total lack of anything, we are thrilled beyond words with the JWW backpack project. If only we could all be there the day they distribute the backpacks to the children!!!!

So, if one would ask about our overriding feelings now that we are home, we would say that we feel both very sad and very validated. The horrors suffered by the people we met will leave an enduring picture on our minds and an indelible mark on our hearts. We feel so fortunate to have a vehicle through which we can work to continue to make a difference in the lives of the survivors of genocide. The needs of the refugees are so vast and unmet, that the only limit to the impact we can make lies in the level of interest we can stimulate and the amount of energy we can generate.

We have renewed enthusiasm for the work of JWW and feel more passionately than ever about the vital importance of our mission, one borne of the ancient teachings of our people, which are as relevant today as they were when originally fashioned. We are so proud of our Jewish World Watch community and how they choose to live the words of the Torah: "Do not stand idly by . . . ."