

# Recruits Leaving Vermont Chicken-Processing Plant



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Harold Jacobs discussing his employment of Vietnamese refugees in his chicken slaughterhouse in South Royalton, Vt.

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SOUTH ROYALTON, Vt.—

"My parents were refugees, and grandparents, too. Unc es, aunts, everybody," Harold Jacobs was saying in the office of his chicken slaughterhouse here. "On the Lower East Side of New York they were working in sweat shops.

"All the refugees, they all worked themselves," he went on. "The second generation always had it better than the first."

A few hundred yards down the road, in their second floor apartment of an old wooden house owned by Mr. Jacobs, some of this nation's newest refugees—a group of young men who had been in the South Vietnamese Navy—were not quite so certain.

Since last June 28 Vietnamese refugees have been sent to work in Mr. Jacobs's Forest Poultry Company plant here from the refugee camp in Indiantown Gap, Pa.

They have not been happy with the work here. Only nine are still working at the plant. Some of the others have found people here in Northern Vermont to help them. The rest have scattered across the country in hopes of finding friends, relatives or other jobs.

A 10th Vietnamese arrived here last week from a chicken processing plant in Maine to be with his friends, but quickly said through an interpreter that he planned to leave Mr. Jacobs's employ as soon as possible.

pational Safety and Health Agency inspected Mr. Jacobs's plant, issued 22 citations for alleged violations of state health and safety laws designed to protect employees and called for a \$625 fine. Mr. Jacobs contends that the inspection was an example of the "harassment" directed against him by state officials.

Symbolic of the conflict are the cut and swollen fingers that many of the Vietnamese get soon after they begin to work at the chicken processing plant.

The injuries result when the workers pull the entrails out of birds moving along production line. The ends of their fingers strike against the vertebrae and other bones of the chickens, according to one medical report, some 3,000 times a day. The result was battered and swollen fingers, debris lodged under the nails, and many of the fingernails blackening and falling off.

#### Common for Beginner

Mr. Jacobs and his plant manager, Peter Coombs, said that such injuries—and a rash that some of the workers develop on their forearms—were common among beginning workers in poultry plants. If the Vietnamese had stuck with their jobs for a month or so, they said, their bodies would have adjusted to the unfamiliar work and their hands and arms would have cleared up.

"It was very bad conditions," said Vo Van Quang, a 33-year-old former military policeman. "Because the birds move very quickly, we got injured. The boss did not pay for us to see the doctor."

He and other Vietnamese said they could not wear protective gloves because they would be unable to keep up with the moving line. Mr. Coombs said the line moved at the rate of 28 birds a minute, adding that this was somewhat slower than many other plants.

Daniel V. Ruffino, a placement worker for the Tolstoy Foundation, the agency that arranged for the Vietnamese to come here, said in a telephone interview that a case worker had been sent to check the "facilities" nad had found them "adequate." Mr. Jacobs's operation was one of the largest placements the foundation had made, he said, and one that had created many problems.

"It's a hard job," Mr. Ruffino said. "Some could hack it, and some couldn't."

#### Criticism of Agency

Mr. Jacobs, whose harsh urban accent sounds exotic here, contends that relief placement agency glossed over the difficulties of chicken processing.

"They sent us a bunch of young men who never worked," he said. "I think they just hung around with the American Army and Navy."

Mr. Coombs agreed, saying, "They were just shuffling meat. They wanted the \$500 each agency gets for placing one. They were like modern-day slave traders."

Mr. Jacobs, who had spent much of his life in the live chicken business in New York City, brought the plant here in 1967 at an auction after a previous owner defaulted on a Small Business Administration loan.

The plant processes what are known as "spent hens," chickens that have passed their prime for commercial egg laying. They are killed, plucked, dressed and processed into a low grade of poultry that is sold as "fowl." Some of the birds—mainly those that are missing parts—are sold to be cut up into such products as chicken pies and chow mein. The plant handles about 10,000 birds a day.

Mr. Jacobs's source of workers has been unusual. Soon after he bought the plant, he arranged with Vermont officials

to employ mentally retarded persons from the state's Brandon Training School. But in 1973, the state stopped the practice, charging, among other things that there had been inadequate medical care.

Mr. Jacobs then set up a "training program" in which "Korean" workers were imported to learn the poultry business. The United States Immigration Service, investigating the p d it did not fit in with Federal regulations and denied further immigration applications.

Of the 17 Koreans, many have left the job. Mr. Jacobs says seven are still at the plant. Recently, he also acquired the services of three Chinese refugees who fled the mainland.

Mr. Jacobs pays the Vietnamese workers \$2.10 an hour, the minimum wage, and deducts \$10 a week from each for housing. The Vietnamese live, usually two to a room, in apartments that Mr. Jacobs owns.

In the house near the plant, the foreman and his wife live in the apartment downstairs. In the upstairs apartment the other day, the Vietnamese stared out the windows at the chill, unfamiliar sight of Vermont's first snowfall. Few have any winter clothes.

Mr. Jacobs gave the following version of the problem: "The trouble began with the Government. With them being told what their entitled to—welfare and food stamps and if you're tired in the morning you don't have to go to work. Then there were the bleeding hearts that said they shouldn't have to work like regular refugees. "If you go to the chicken plants in Boston and your other cities, you'll find these jobs being done by Latins, most of them illegal immigrants, because they're the only ones that will take them. These aren't very attractive jobs for anybody."

#### Controversy on Sponsorship

Mr. Jacobs's sponsorship of the refugees has begun to stir controversy. Some local residents and a number of state officials who have had contact with the poultry operator and the Vietnamese angrily contend that he is using them not unlike indentured servants.

Recently the Vermont Occu-