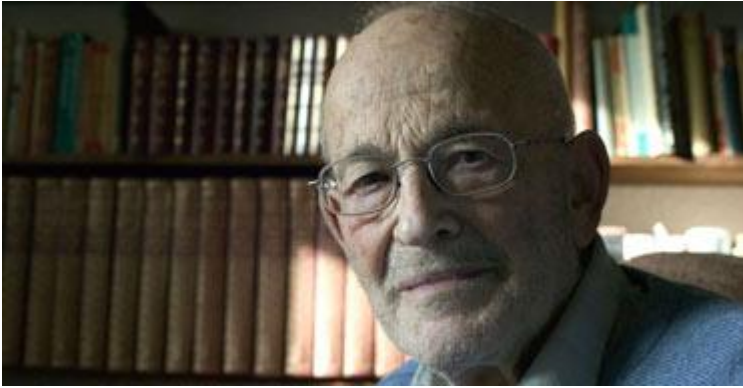


Rescuing academic refugees

A British organisation is celebrating 75 years of helping lecturers abused by repressive regimes. Anthea Lipsett reports

The Guardian, Tuesday 29 January 2008



Lewis Elton, father of the comedian Ben, is the oldest surviving beneficiary of Cara's work and, at 84, is still an active academic. Photograph: Frank Baron

Fitsum Habtemariam was a lecturer in Eritrea in December 2004, a time of political upheaval. A government official asked him what he thought about the situation during a meeting at the university.

"I thought it was really positive when someone came to ask for my opinion, and I thought it would make a difference. I gave some comments about the lack of democracy, and the fact that the president had been in power for many years without an election," he explains.

At dawn the next day, he was arrested, detained and tortured. "They did horrible things to me. I still have marks all over my body," he says.

Habtemariam escaped a year later when a lorry taking him and fellow prisoners to do forced labour collided with a bus. In the ensuing confusion, he got away, crossed the border to Sudan, and eventually came to England with the help of an American friend.

After he was granted refugee status, Habtemariam won a scholarship to study for an MSc in petroleum geosciences at Manchester University. He was awarded a maintenance grant by the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (Cara).

"Without them, I would have had nobody to help me," he says. "I'm working very hard, and hopefully I will get a job when I finish the course in September."

Cara, which is celebrating its 75th birthday this year, has helped at least 9,000 academic refugees. The organisation was set up by William Beveridge in 1933, after he learned about the dozens of leading professors being dismissed from their posts in German universities on racial or political grounds by the new Nazi regime.

Beveridge, who was director of the London School of Economics at the time, worked with the Royal Society and the British Academy to offer teaching positions to threatened scholars of international reputation, while convincing British academic staff to contribute a percentage of their salaries towards a fund.

He gained the support of many prominent people of the day, including John Maynard Keynes and Ernest Rutherford. Albert Einstein addressed a fundraising meeting at the Royal Albert Hall in 1933.

Fleeing the Nazis

One of the scholars fleeing Nazi Germany in the 1930s was Victor Ehrenberg. He later changed his name to Victor Elton, and was the father of two celebrated academics, Lewis and the late Sir Geoffrey Elton.

"Father had a professorship in ancient history in Prague," Lewis Elton explains. "After Munich [when Hitler threatened to go to war with Czechoslovakia unless the Sudetenland was ceded to Germany], everybody knew things were changing fast. Father was out in Switzerland. He had made contacts, and immediately he got back, my parents started trying to get out. He managed to get a grant from Cara, or the Society for the Protection of Learning and the Sciences, as it was then known." The family came to England on February 14 1939.

The grant lasted a year, after which Victor Elton became a classics master in a Carlisle grammar school. Despite speaking no English to start with, both his sons flourished and won scholarships. They went into teaching and took University of London external degrees before going on to academic careers.

Lewis Elton, the oldest surviving beneficiary of Cara's work, has had a distinguished academic career and is still, aged 84, working as professor of higher education at Manchester University and professor emeritus at University College London. He is the father of the comedian and writer Ben Elton. His brother, Geoffrey, was a Cambridge historian.

Today Cara assists around 140 academic refugees, in the main to study for new qualifications at UK universities. Its birthday celebrations were launched last week with a lecture by Albie Sachs, the South African judge who, as an anti-apartheid campaigner, fled persecution twice, and is the only refugee to receive two Cara grants.

In the 60s, Sachs worked as a barrister, defending people charged under the apartheid system's repressive security laws. He was seized by police and placed in solitary confinement twice - first for 168 days and then for three months, two years later. He escaped to England in 1966.

Mental wreck

"I was a mental wreck," he says. "It wasn't just the grant, that wasn't huge; it was the human contact and sympathy that were important. When your dignity has been grossly violated, you ache for human contact and you long for the simple morals you stand for to be regarded as normal."

He was helped by the woman often said to "be" Cara - Esther Simpson. "The knowledge that she had helped refugees from Hitler meant I felt somehow that I was in a very honourable stream."

Cara helped Sachs to take a PhD at Southampton University, where he taught law for 10 years. Then, after a move to Mozambique, he was attacked once more by the South African regime. In 1988, he lost an arm and the sight of one eye when a bomb was placed in his car by security agents.

"I was taken by stretcher to an aeroplane and straight to a London hospital - and Cara came to my support again. Again, it was important to feel validated as a human being."

The work Cara helped Sachs to complete at London University's Institute of Commonwealth Studies underpinned South Africa's new democratic constitution. "Academics live very much through the mind, and to be able to re-establish yourself as an intellectual means that you can be independent and contribute as much as you receive," Sachs says.

This is a sentiment shared by many of Cara's beneficiaries. Raheb was forced to leave Sudan after fighting for women's rights and opposing the sharia law that was imposed after the 1989 coup. She has just completed a master's in engineering for sustainable development at Cambridge University.

"That restored my confidence, self-esteem and dignity," she says. "When I arrived, I felt uneasy and marginalised, not living up to my potential intellectually or emotionally. Now I feel rehabilitated as a human being."

Cara is helping academics from 32 countries. "Many face imprisonment, torture and execution because of their academic position and the views they hold," says the organisation's executive secretary, John Akker.

In Iraq, for example, 300 academics have been assassinated since 2003. Countless more have been kidnapped because they are regarded as a threat to the country's extreme religious orders.

"We currently assist 140 academics," says Akker. "Many come from Africa and the Middle East. They desperately need help - they need money to help them continue their work and to cover some living costs. Many are on the bread line."