

Ann Silversides

he academic year was just beginning and faculty were swamped, but Dr. Morton Beiser couldn't let it pass. The article in the *National Post* — “These refugees and immigrants can be deadly,” the headline said — had suggested that malaria, syphilis, leprosy and tuberculosis were being spread among unsuspecting Canadians, and Beiser was furious at the misinformation. The Toronto psychiatrist, who is director of the 3-year-old Joint Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement, was concerned because the article was “frankly fearmongering. It cites the source of disease as people from Latin America, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. I am concerned that health is being used as a smoke screen for other kinds of ‘purity.’”

Beiser promptly organized a public forum and, at short notice, managed to bring together expert panellists such as Dr. Jay Keystone (Tropical Disease Unit, Toronto General Hospital) and Dr. Ron St. John (Global Surveillance and Field Epidemiology, Health Canada). “Tuberculosis is a serious issue, yes,” Beiser says. “But as for the rest, how can you say immigrants are responsible for syphilis, when immigration is up and the incidence of syphilis is down?”

Beiser's angry response reveals much about a man whom colleague Dr. Sam Noh describes as someone “who integrates what happens on the street with scholarly pursuits.” So compelling was this blend to Noh that he left a tenured university position to move to Toronto and work as a senior research scientist in the Culture, Community and Health Studies Program that Beiser established in 1991 at the Clarke Institute (now part of Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health Studies). “There was a recognition that Toronto was so diverse ethnoculturally that this had implications for mental health services,” he explains.

Beiser's trademark blending of scholar with compassionate activist is also evident in his recently published book, *Strangers At the Gate: The Boat People's First Ten Years in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 1999). It is based on his study, which tracked 1300 refugees and revealed that they used fewer health and social services than the general population as they settled into Canada. The book engages readers through the personal stories of many refugees — those who've flourished and those who've floundered.

Beiser, 63, grew up in Regina, the child of Jewish immigrants who ran a corner store. “It's not just an accident what field you end up focusing on. With my background it's no surprise that I am concerned with the fair treatment of immigrants and refugees.” But he is adamant that “you don't let personal passion interfere with scientific objectivity. The best way to stay honest is to acknowledge the tension and to do research that is as impeccable as possible.”

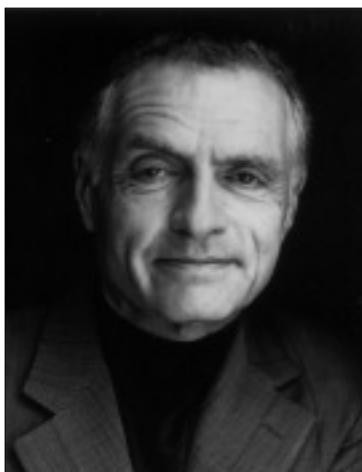
Beiser has little time for sloppy thought. A well-known radio interviewer told him that “everyone knows” that the boat people did well but people should not “generalize” because of their experience. “Why is it considered unacceptable to generalize from good news when no one hesitates to generalize from bad news?” asks Beiser.

After graduating from the University of British Columbia, Beiser became part of the brain drain of the 1960s by doing his psychiatric residency and graduate work in sociology in the US. By 1970 he was an associate professor at the Harvard School of Public Health; his mentor was psychiatrist Alexander Leighton, 91, who said in an interview that he and Beiser have shared “a fascination with how culture works in creating and mitigating mental illness.”

In 1976, married with 3 young sons, Beiser decided to return to Canada and accepted a position at UBC. “It was hard to give up Harvard, but there comes a moment when you have to decide if you are Canadian or not. And I found there were things about this society that were too precious to give up. One of the tangibles is freedom from fear.”

Beiser is proud that his Culture, Community and Health Studies Program has attracted more than \$4 million in external research funding and several senior scientist awards. But as Noh notes, “the issues of immigrants and refugees don't seem to hit the heart of scholars and policymakers. When there is debate, it centres on the political and indigenous interests of the main group.”

For years Beiser has been trying to convince the MRC and National Health Research and Development Program to promote special competitions involving health and immigrants. “Canada receives about 200 000 immigrants and refugees a year. We know they have problems accessing health care, and yet there is no research money dedicated to these topics.”



Morton Beiser: media reports are “fearmongering”