

The Last Refugee

Story 1 in an ongoing series

Through the closing door

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First in a series of occasional articles on the Syrian refugee families resettling here, and the local people assisting them.

It took a moment, when they woke up in a strange new place, to remember where they were and how they'd gotten there.

Framingham. A town near Boston. In America.

Abdulkader Hayani walked through the clean, bright rooms of his family's new home, reaching out to touch the things that had been left there for them. The four small beds for his four children. The ceramic plates and baby bottles in the kitchen. The soft brown couch; the brand-new toys; the overflowing fruit bowl with a pineapple beside it.

In the middle of the night, the Hayani family arrived at their new home. Before leaving for the night, Danny Woodward of Jewish Family Service of Metrowest (JFS) taught Abdulkader Hayani how to dial 911 on a cellphone.

The 29-year-old Syrian refugee knew what he'd been told, arriving here last night: This house was theirs to live in while they started their new life. But everything last night had been a blur; he had been so overwhelmed by strangeness and exhaustion. Seeing it now in the wintry morning light, he could not help but wonder if he had misunderstood.

It was so beautiful, so much. Had they only dreamed that it was theirs?

The family had been searching for a new home since fleeing their own in Aleppo in 2012, amid the bloody civil war in Syria. They had hoped they would one day go back. Then it became clear that they could not. It took years of waiting, living in limbo in Jordan, to be cleared for travel to the United States. The war was still raging five years later when they finally boarded a plane in Amman. By then, more than 4 million Syrians had fled the country. An estimated 400,000 had been killed.

Abdulkader had fastened his seat belt and begun to cry. He cried all the way to Germany, for the country he loved and might never see again.

When they stepped off the plane at Logan Airport on Jan. 18, it had seemed at first that no one was there to meet them. The children had collapsed in sleep on a bench, the four of them draped over their mother, bent like flowers in need of watering. Abdulkader stood apart, a name tag looped around his neck, listening to the bland, staccato security announcements he could not understand. He gazed around the half-deserted terminal, wondering what to do next.

All at once the Americans appeared, concerned and apologetic, after rushing from the wrong gate where they had been waiting. They carried signs that said “Welcome” in Arabic — listing the family’s names — and as soon as Abdulkader saw them, everything felt different.

Somebody knew them. They were not alone here.

The exhausted Hayani family got help from Barbara Shapiro, synagogue volunteer and philanthropist, while waiting for their bags at Logan Airport.

When the smallest child — 2-year-old Ameeneh — began wailing from exhaustion, one of the American women picked her up, swaying her from side to side until she quieted. Another American had brought a football. He tossed it playfully with the older boys on the long walk from baggage claim to the garage.

The relief of having someone there, showing them the way, carried Abdulkader through the last leg of their journey: the harsh shock of January air; the cumbersome, unfamiliar buckling of carseats. On their drive, ice sparkled faintly on the highway, under pine trees silhouetted black against mauve sky.

In his first moments in his new home in Framingham, Abdulkader Hayani lay his sleeping daughter down on her new bed.

It was after midnight when they made it to the house. The children started playing, their fatigue magically gone, while the Americans showed Abdulkader how to use the oven and call 911.

Then their guides gathered up their coats and paperwork and said good night, leaving the travelers to a long-awaited rest.

The family could not fathom, yet, what their arrival meant to those Americans. An unlikely coalition of Jewish leaders and synagogue members, local Syrian-Americans and Muslims, philanthropists and refugee experts, they had worked for months to bring the Syrian refugees to Boston. With determination and persistence, they had convinced the State Department and its partners that the families could succeed here, in spite of the city’s high cost of living. They’d asked to receive families with children, making those young lives a focus of their mission. They’d woven a safety net, flexible and strong, to make certain that it turned out right.

The support they got along the way had overwhelmed them — housefuls of donated furniture, stacks of donated gift cards, scores of enthusiastic volunteers lining up to offer child care and English lessons. Congregants at a dozen synagogues pledged to sponsor Syrian families at

varying levels. At one, supporters donated \$100,000 in a month and arranged to help two families pay rent for a year.

Then came the US election, and a stunning threat: The new president might stop refugees from coming.

A dozen families, or more, were supposed to make new homes near Boston. Abdulkader's was only the second to come. No one knew if the rest would make it — or how those who did might be affected by the turmoil.

Starting over would be hard enough, even with help. They would have to learn to navigate a new culture and a new language, and they would have to do it fast; they were expected to find jobs and start supporting themselves within six months, a year at the outside. At the same time, they had to reckon with the past, come to terms with losses they had suffered. They would have to do it all without their extended families near — in a country where they knew some people did not welcome them.

Sometime soon — maybe today, maybe tomorrow — this family would dare to start unpacking, hanging up the remnants of their past in empty closets. In one suitcase lay the coats made by Abdulkader, a tailor who had honed his craft since he was 9 years old. These were high-end garments, elegantly cut, every inch engineered by his expert hands. In them, he saw everything his life had been — and, perhaps, a way to make a future.

Everything was uncertain, and everything was at stake. Tomorrow Donald Trump would be sworn in as president.

America, like this family, faced a new day, and no one could be sure what it would bring.

Some volunteers from Temple Beth Elohim in Wellesley carried household items into the home for the Hayani family, who were to arrive in a few days time.

The next morning, Bonnie Rosenberg drove to the cream-colored house with the black shutters where the Hayanis now lived. The Newton retiree was hopeful and excited: Today she would finally meet the Syrian family. For months, Bonnie and the other volunteers from Temple Beth Elohim in Wellesley had prepared for the family's arrival. They had collected donations of cash and clothing and furniture; they had shopped for soap and pillows and umbrellas. They had pondered questions that could not be answered yet:

What will they be like? How will they feel about us? How will we communicate with no common language?

Bonnie, an expressive, youthful-seeming grandmother of eight, had been to the house two days earlier, just before the family arrived. The volunteers had met there to make plans for the family's first days: A walk to the playground. A trip to buy winter boots. A first visit to the grocery store. They waited outside in the driveway until the caseworker came, found the key and

opened up the door. Then, just inside, they all had fallen silent, overwhelmed by the sight that greeted them.

Mattresses donated by Bob's Discount Furniture were carried into the Hayani home. The delivery services were donated by Mark's Moving. JFS staffer Rand Imad Chaqmaqchee checked the locks on a bedroom window before a Syrian family moved in.

The morning light revealed the loving preparations of another team of temple volunteers who had turned the tidy house into a cozy haven. There were toothbrushes and towels in the bathroom, child-safety latches in the kitchen cabinets, notecards taped above the appliances, providing instructions in handwritten Arabic. Two matching baby dolls lay near the front door, for the two little girls who would be soon be here.

A word came into Bonnie's mind unbidden: *sacred*.

She, like many of the others who stepped up to help, strongly felt that Jewish history demanded it. Jews had suffered and died by the millions in World War II, in part because other nations wouldn't take them in. The United States had been among those who refused. How could they now ignore another displaced people? Bonnie had volunteered eagerly and with conviction, but still, the practicalities were worrisome. She could not speak their language; did not know their customs. How much help could she really offer?

But standing in this house so carefully, tenderly readied, she saw that they would give these strangers the most basic things: Warmth. Acceptance. A place to feel safe.

All of the volunteers felt it. Several were in tears. They were moved to pray, but they hesitated — the family coming to live here was Muslim. Was a Jewish prayer appropriate? They turned to the caseworker, the only Muslim there.

"We say 'Amin' at the end of a prayer; you say 'Amen.' There is so much that is the same," the woman told them.

They sat in a circle on the floor and said a well-known Hebrew prayer of gratitude: "Barukh ata adonai elohenu melek ha'olam, shehecheyanu, v'kiymanu, v'higiyanu la'z'man ha'zeh."

"Blessed are you, God, who has granted us life and sustained us . . . and allowed us to reach this occasion."

Now, returning to the house on her first day as a volunteer, Bonnie carried that same sense of gratitude. On this morning, she would drive with the family to a government office in downtown Framingham, the first of many bureaucratic errands. There, the family's resettlement caseworker would help Abdulkader and his wife apply for food stamps and other temporary benefits, aid that would sustain them until he found work. Bonnie's job, with another volunteer, was to entertain the children — two boys and two girls — while their parents were occupied.

A snowsuit awaited a child in what would be Fatimah and Ameeneh Hayain's bedroom closet.

She thought of all the family had gone through to reach this day. She did not know much about their journey, but she knew it had been hard. She resolved to be, with the children, the calmest, gentlest version of herself. She had worried about driving their father downtown — unsure if he would be at ease in the car with a woman — but his grateful smile reassured her. The awkward silence on the drive quickly dissolved, as Bonnie taught the boys what the stoplights meant — “Green, go! Red, stop!” — and they happily chimed in from the backseat.

Bonnie had deliberately chosen this day to spend with the family. It was Jan. 20, Inauguration Day. She had been heartbroken by Trump’s victory; she could not bear to think about the midday ceremony. It was the first inauguration she would ignore since college, where she’d majored in political science and been caught up in the passions of the 1960s. Now she focused on the things she could hang on to, the values she believed in.

She knew the road ahead would not always be smooth, for the family or the people helping them. At a training session for the temple volunteers, she had listened to a stream of anxious questions: *What do we say if the families are scared of being sent back? What if we’re out with them somewhere and someone harasses them? What if we don’t agree with them about the role of women?*

Just having arrived from the airport, Ali and Mustafa Hayani saw their bedroom for the first time.

The concerns were real, but with the children near, Bonnie felt it in her gut: Good had to prevail. They arrived at the government office and settled into a large, uncrowded waiting room lined with plastic chairs. Bonnie emptied the bag her grandchildren had helped her pack, full of books and stickers, paper and markers to play with. The boys, Mustafa and Ali, were 9 and 8; whip smart and beautifully behaved, they had warmed to Bonnie’s fond, straightforward manner right away. Their little sisters, 2 and 3, looked almost like twins, their big, dark eyes inquisitive and friendly.

The children’s attention anchored her in place. She forgot, for a time, what was happening elsewhere.

Just after noon her Apple watch flashed an update: It was done. America had a new president.

Bonnie held the child in her lap a little tighter.

Now it’s up to us, she thought.

A few days later, in her tiny kitchen in Framingham, a young Syrian woman raised a shaker of mixed spices above a pan of chicken. She breathed in the familiar scent: cinnamon and cardamom; cumin, ginger, pepper. This simple food would mark a milestone: Late tonight, if all went well, another family of Syrian refugees would arrive at a nearby apartment. They would carry in their suitcases, lay their children down, and sit at last to eat their first meal in America.

Nermin Helaly of JFS soothed an emotional Um Alnoor at Logan Airport as they waited for luggage.

The young woman had been here since November; her family had been the first to come to Boston. Fearing possible repercussions for family members in Syria, she asked that her real name not be used and that she be identified instead as Um Alnoor, or mother of Alnoor, her son's middle name. Hers had been the only family here for two months, but three more had just arrived, including the Hayanis. She knew there was a chance the next one wouldn't make it; at any time, the brand-new president might block more Syrian families from coming. Already she had seen one arrival canceled, a pregnant mother abruptly deemed unfit to travel. It had been a sharp reminder that uncertainty remained — and she knew how quickly uncertainty could become chaos.

Her family had left their home in Darayya, a suburb of Damascus, in 2012, after her husband, Abu Alnoor — the father of Alnoor, as he asked to be called — was badly hurt in a brutal militia attack. The 30-year-old had ventured out in search of diapers for his baby son and medicine for his mother when he found himself under fire in the street. He had tried to duck into a building but couldn't find a way inside. When he went to help an injured teenager lying in the open, his arms and legs were ripped by shrapnel. Seriously wounded and in need of treatment, he fled for the border with his family within weeks.

Just before the crossing, the family was caught in an ambush, cowering on the ground with their 18-month-old. “No child was allowed to cry,” Um Alnoor recalled. “No cellphone was allowed to light. . . . They were shooting at people, and if you fell, no one came to get you.”

Over the border, they spent five hard years in Jordan, their freedom to work tightly restricted, before they were approved to go to the United States. Um Alnoor had been unnerved by Trump's election — like so many, she had not expected him to win — but she tried to set aside concern. They flew first to Germany, with a large group of refugees, then on to Miami. There the family parted from the others. On the nighttime flight to Boston, they were alone: surrounded by Americans, submerged in a choppy tide of English words.

Their flight landed after 11 p.m., the lights of the city they had never seen beneath them. They knew no one in this place that would be their home; they had never met or spoken to the strangers who would meet them at the airport. They filed slowly up the ramp behind the other passengers, some wearing shorts and flip-flops in the chilly air.

As Um Alnoor emerged into bright fluorescence, she saw a woman in a white head scarf straight ahead, beaming at her and holding her arms open. Then Um Alnoor was enveloped in her embrace, both of them crying, swaying back and forth. The woman who held her — resettlement caseworker Nermin Helaly — murmured in Arabic: “You're OK now. This is the end of your journey.”

Moments off the plane, 5-year-old Alnoor quietly took in the strange surroundings.

They stood that way for nearly a minute, the other passengers streaming around them. Leaning into Um Alnoor's side was her 5-year-old son, his expression somber, his gaze cast down to the floor.

She stepped back and wiped the tears from her cheeks. She felt overpowering gratitude and relief — and she felt another, less familiar feeling.

For the first time since the war started, she felt safe.

Since then, nearly every day had felt like progress. Their son had gone off to kindergarten. Her husband had found a job in a small grocery. Um Alnoor was learning English, proudly greeting the caseworker with an easy “Hi, how are you?” There was even time now, here and there, for dreams: about buying their own house one day or opening a restaurant like they'd had in Syria.

And there were, at last, other Syrians here. One family was living with Americans in Needham; another was in Boston. The largest — the Hayanis, with their four young children — were close by, in the rented house in Framingham. Each had help from members of a different Jewish temple.

Now, in the kitchen that had come to feel familiar, Um Alnoor finished cooking for this night's arrival, sprinkling golden raisins onto the baked chicken. She emptied a large bowl of yellow basmati rice — flecked through with chopped onion, tomato, and peppers — into a tinfoil platter and snapped on a plastic cover. Then she did the same with a chopped salad. Later, she would take the food next door to the new family's apartment, in the same brick residential complex.

Abu Alnoor and his wife, Um Alnoor, walked their 5-year-old son, Alnoor, along Route 9 in Framingham to his bus stop.

She knew they, too, would feel uncertainty and fear, walking off the plane and into the unknown, and she hoped that familiar food would be a comfort. More than that, she hoped they all would be OK, in this place where hope was real, but so much was unknown.

That night, just before the next family arrived, the bad news they had all been dreading finally broke: President Trump planned to sign an executive order choking off the flow of refugees to the United States.

In the cavernous Delta terminal at Logan Airport, the Americans were on their way to greet the family at their gate. They carried the usual gifts — stuffed animals for the children, flowers for the mother, warm coats for them all to wear on the way home. The head of the resettlement agency held up his phone to show his staff the breaking news. Gathered around him, they stood silent for a minute, reading the words on the screen and absorbing the impact. The murmur of travelers echoed through the space around them, under a giant American flag that hung from the ceiling.

With President Trump's travel ban looming, tension and stress showed on the face of JFS case manager Nermin Helaly as she filled the refrigerator for a Syrian refugee family whose arrival was suddenly postponed.

No one had to say it — it was understood: Tonight might be the last time they performed this ritual. This family would make it, just in time. But this family might be the last to reach them.

Only a few months had passed since the State Department had agreed to send Syrian refugees to Boston. Getting the green light had not been easy, given the high rents seen as an obstacle to refugees' success. But outcry over the Syrian crisis was growing, as was pressure on the US government to help.

Back then, everyone thought Hillary Clinton would win the election, and more Syrian refugees would follow. Then Trump won, and the clock started ticking on his promised immigration crackdown.

The resettlement agency staff waited for a family with stuffed animals and the fear that this family could be the last to make it after President Trump's executive order on immigrants. A young Syrian refugee carried balloons through Logan Airport, a gift from some members of Temple Emmanuel in Newton.

There was a window, before the inauguration, when a handful of families could get through. But what would happen to the others they had planned for?

The answer meant more to them than they had ever expected. For Marc Jacobs, the leader of the team, it was a chance to revitalize a core mission of his agency, Jewish Family Service of Metrowest, which had helped to resettle Russian Jews in the 1990s. For his partner in the venture, Ed Shapiro, it was also deeply personal. The 52-year-old investment manager had recently retired from daily work to spend more time on philanthropy. He had aimed, with this project, to show his children the power individuals had to make a difference.

Ed Shapiro greeted the exhausted Hayani family, shaking the hand of 9-year-old Mustafa.

Ed had been at the airport when the Hayanis arrived; he had tossed the football with the boys while his wife, Barbara, cradled one of the weary toddlers in her arms. They had also welcomed the first family, in November. One week later, on Thanksgiving Day, Ed drove to Framingham with his teenage son and daughter and delivered a hot turkey dinner to Um Alnoor, her husband, and son. With it they brought a page of Arabic writing, translated from English, that explained the meaning of the holiday.

It said, too, how thankful their family was that the Syrians had made it to America.

Ed had recalled the visit often since that day. To stand with people whose lives you had helped change, whose child's fate you had helped to shape, was the rarest privilege he had ever known.

He held the memory close as the borders closed.

The volunteers couldn't talk with Abdulkader, but when they visited his family in their new home and saw the coats he'd made, they understood: This man had a calling. He needed to sew. A machine was found, a basic Singer, collecting dust in one of their back rooms. One week after the family's arrival, on Jan. 26, volunteers arranged to bring it to the house and surprise him.

They carried it inside and placed it on a table. The tailor pulled up a chair, switched on a light. His wife appeared with a ripped pair of pants. Abdulkader flicked the machine on, it hummed to life, and then, leaning in, he began to sew.

His family fell silent, seemingly transfixed. The sight of his slight frame attending to the bobbin and the steady sound were so familiar, after all these days of unrelenting strangeness.

They knew Trump was poised to restrict immigration, barring other Syrian refugees from coming. Abdulkader assumed, when he heard about Trump's order, that it would mean his family would have to leave. *Where can we go now?, he asked himself. Will we have to go back to Syria?*

The Americans reassured him he was safe. Abdulkader listened and tried to believe. Soon enough, the courts would intervene, placing a temporary hold on the president's action. The door reopened, just a crack; only time would swing it wide, or slam it shut.

Temple volunteers found a Singer sewing machine for the tailor Abdulkader Hayani, who immediately repaired his daughter's pants.

Outside, the pale winter sun was sinking through the trees. Pinkish light came through the curtains in the living room. He finished sewing the red pants and held them up.

He could not explain how much the gift meant, after everything he'd lost before he came here. It was a small machine, but it was a start, and the kindness of the gesture from these strangers stunned him.

He stood up, barefoot on the rug, and turned to face them. "Thank you so much," he said in English.

[See more photos from this story](#)

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Syrian refugee resettlement partners

Lead agency

- Jewish Family Service of Metrowest

Synagogue partners committed to sponsoring refugee families

- Temple Beth Am, Framingham
- Temple Beth Elohim, Wellesley
- Temple Beth Shalom, Framingham
- Temple Emanuel, Newton
- Temple Israel, Boston
- Temple Israel, Natick
- Temple Shalom, Newton
- Congregation Kehillath Israel, Brookline
- Temple Sinai, Brookline
- Temple Beth Shalom, Needham

Other key partners

- Combined Jewish Philanthropies
- Framingham Adult ESL Plus
- Framingham State University
- HIAS (formerly Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society)
- Jewish Vocational Service, Boston
- MetroWest Medical Center
- William James College, Newton
- American Arab Benevolent Association
- Islamic Center of Boston, Wayland
- Masjid-E-Basheer (Islamic Society of Framingham)