

Home > U.S.
News

Refugees' Boston Tea Party: Relieved but Fearful Syrians Confront a New Reality

Two days after Trump slammed entry restrictions on Muslim immigrants, a Jewish leader assisting five refugee families is struck by the gracious hospitality of little Fatima and her parents.

Marisa Fox-Bevilacqua | Jan 30, 2017 9:58 PM



A room for two small girls from a Syrian family was lovingly furnished by volunteers from Jewish Family Services Metrowest of Greater Boston. Credit: Marc Jacobs

On Sunday morning, her first one in the United States, “Fatima,” a 5-year-old Syrian girl, clutched her teddy bear and set up her new tea set in a two-bedroom apartment on the outskirts of Boston. There were guests in the house and she wanted to be a good hostess. Though her mother had brewed coffee for them, she wanted to do her share, too. She poured imaginary tea into dainty, little cups and served them, smiling as her guests pretended to drink.

“It’s what you’d expect of any 5-year-old,” says Marc Jacobs, the CEO of Jewish Family Service of Metrowest, who had helped resettle Fatima and her family just a few days earlier in Boston. “Whether she’s from Aleppo or Boston, a child is a child.”

Jacobs first set the wheels in motion for the family’s arrival nine months ago when Mark Hetfield, the president of HIAS, the veteran refugee-resettlement organization, approached him about partnering with them to help resettle 12 to 15 Syrian refugee families in the Boston area. When Jacobs began to consider helping the newcomers back then, of course, he wasn’t expecting a refugee ban such as that just imposed by President Donald Trump, which has sewed mass chaos and panic.

“At first I thought 'no' – not because I didn’t want to do it, but because I wasn’t sure I could do it right,” Jacobs tells Haaretz. “Because the cost of housing in eastern Massachusetts is much more than in other areas, and certainly not affordable for those who do low-skilled, minimum-wage work, I knew I’d need extra supports in place.”

Enter the Jewish community of Boston.

Because the government has until now provided assistance to refugees for three months, Jacobs knew he’d need “gap money” – funds to help carry the new immigrants until they would become financially self-sufficient. He estimated that to be \$1,500 for a family of four per month, in a modest, two-level apartment.

He found financial assistance from relatives of the Sharp family, which helped save Jews from Nazi Europe and are the focus of Ken Burn’s recent documentary, “Defying the Nazis: The Sharp’s War.”

“It's all intertwined,” says Jacobs. “They are a family of Righteous Among the Nations.”

He also realized he needed volunteers to make the new neighbors feel welcome. Local synagogues like Temple Emanuel in Newton had thrown their hats into the ring a year earlier, urging congregants in their high-holiday sermon of September 2015 to take in a Syrian refugee family. Metrowest also tapped its own youth and community volunteers who sprang into action, helping to furnish homes, stock refrigerators, buy toys, greet the Syrians at the airport and cook meals that would await them in their new homes, and also function as big brothers and sisters to the children.

Since October, five Syrian families have moved to Boston – four in the last week or so, says Jacobs – a total of 23 people, 13 of whom are children, with the youngest just having turned one.

“Most of the children [we've helped] are between 3- and 6-years old,” he notes. “The moms are mostly in 20s, the dads in their 30s, and like any parent in the U.S., they will do anything to build a better life for their children.”



A Syrian woman heats a meal she prepared for a new Syrian refugee family resettled by HIAS in partnership with JFS Metrowest in their new home in Boston. Credit: Marc Jacobs

These refugees faced a long, hard road from the moment they fled their war-ravaged homes in Damascus or Aleppo to transit camps in Jordan or Turkey, waiting sometimes years to clear security hurdles, undergo various <http://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-1.768550>[1/31/2017 8:21:30 AM]

screenings, apply to get on a list for a Green Card, and surmounting other obstacles before being notified they would be permitted to the U.S.

Thus, families like Fatima's felt as if they had won the lottery when they finally boarded that plane headed for Boston's Logan airport. Now, two days after Trump signed an executive order banning all Syrian refugees from entering the country and severely limiting the entry of newcomers from seven Muslim-majority, Middle Eastern countries – they were both frightened and relieved they managed to slip in under the wire.

But now, says Jacobs, "We have a family with a pregnant mother who was due to arrive around February 6 with her two girls, one 2- and the other 3-years-old. We had an apartment all ready for them. She got an 'unfit to travel' order, which delayed their travel plans.

So the idea was to wait until she gave birth and the baby was healthy before flying the over. But because she's Syrian, her flight is being cancelled indefinitely. She's stuck at a refugee camp.

"To think we are closing our doors to babies and pregnant moms and tearing families apart is the ugliest thing possible. This is about saving little children and mothers — that's who comes here from Syria. Not terrorists."

Translators and trauma experts

Jacobs anticipated the fact that the newcomers would require extra support; among other things, he arranged for an Arabic-speaking translator and for faith support from the local Islamic Center, and even recruited a prominent local doctor of Syrian origin to be part of his welcoming committee. He also enlisted the help of trauma specialists from the graduate school of psychology at William James College in Boston, which has a Global Mental Health Department.

"People who come from this type of circumstance always have some significant level of psychological distress, whether you call it trauma or not," says Nicholas Covino, president of William James. "You don't leave your country and go through very difficult transitions, and then move in with people you don't know and where you don't speak the language – and emerge without some level of distress."

In the last week, Covino says, there's been a spike in trauma among the refugee population in the U.S. as this population is worried about whether they'll be protected or become targets of the new administration in Washington.

"Right now our priority is to help everyone feel safe," Jacobs says, asking that Haaretz refrain from using the refugees' names and even naming the district where they live or identifying local officials so they can't be targeted by hate groups.

On his visit Sunday to the five Syrian families he welcomed in the last few weeks, Jacobs invited a local legislator along.

"Government can appear so amorphous and threatening, and I wanted to put a [good] face on it for them, and a welcoming one," he says.

When Jacobs and the official arrived at Fatima's family's house – hours after a Boston judge halted Trump's executive order (as did courts in a few other states), and ruled that individuals with valid Green Cards cannot be deported or detained – the little girl wasn't the only one whose face lit up.



Marc Jacobs Credit: Courtesy

“The parents were really pleased to be able to have guests,” says Jacobs. “I find that part of human spirit so inspiring. These are people who have left everything behind, but who want to make sure their guests are comfortable, insisting, ‘You sit on sofa, not on the chair.’ It was just incredible – particularly at a time when I find the leadership in this country to be so egocentric and unaware of the world outside their own skin, totally insensitive to how people look and feel and act.”

Right now, the Jewish Family Service of Metrowest is currently paying rent for two other apartments slated for Syrian refugee families.

“We’re ‘eating’ those costs and praying for the best,” he says. “But we may have to let those go for a while until we see what’s happening. If it turns out that the program is closed, we’ll have to figure out what to do with those apartments.”

Fortunately, Jacob's organization had the foresight to put clauses in the lease agreements that allow that if a family is prohibited from entering the U.S. because of a government restriction, the penalty for breaking the lease will be minor.

Far more worrisome than an un-rented apartment, says Jacobs, are the families that will be torn apart by the new anti-immigration restrictions. He’s still hoping the executive order is revoked or altered so that he can make good on his pledge of helping resettle 60 individuals this year, while alleviating the fears of those already here.

“Even though the families were so gracious when greeting us Sunday morning, you could see they were worried to death about their own children,” says Jacobs. “It brings you to tears. I remind them that we are all children of refugees and that someday their kids will be doctors, legislators, lawyers and professionals like us.”



Marisa Fox-Bevilacqua
Haaretz Contributor

