




REFUGEE STORIES

Suffolk Refugee Support






Refugees have made substantial cultural, social and economic contributions to life in the UK for the last 450 years, a fact not always reflected in political debate and media coverage.

In 1951, in response to the events of WWII, the UN Refugee Convention was drawn up to enshrine the protection of refugees in international law.

It is estimated that the Convention has since helped to protect more than 50 million people worldwide.

Over the years, refugees from across the world have settled in Ipswich. They have helped to shape the town as it is today. And behind all the headlines and statistics, each of these people has an individual story to tell.



Some names have been changed to protect identities

Tom's Story

Meeting Tom Gondris today, he is a charming, well-spoken, retired Englishman. Apart from the unusual surname, there is little hint of the powerful life story he has to tell – a story of separation and loss, but above all, survival.

Tom was born in 1930 to Jewish parents in the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia, known as the Sudetenland. At first, he had a normal childhood, unaware of any looming danger. But this changed with the signing of the Munich agreement in September 1938 – the pact between Nazi Germany, Britain, France and Italy which gave Hitler control of the Sudetenland.



Tom Gondris aged 8

“My last memories of Czechoslovakia are waving goodbye to my parents at Prague railway station. It must have been a traumatic occasion for them”

Within a few days German troops would occupy the area. While they were well received by most of the local population, word had escaped Germany of the treatment of Jews. Tom's parents decided to leave for the capital, Prague. And so, one October night in 1938, began the journey which would eventually lead Tom from this corner of Czechoslovakia to a quite different life in Ipswich.

Although only eight at the time, he remembers the journey well: “It made a big impression on me because we had hired a taxi to drive us from where we lived into Prague. And it was done a few hours before the Germans were going to march in. So it was sort of an escape at the last minute, an exciting journey going over hills late in the evening.”

However, the escape was only temporary. In March 1939 Hitler invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia, including Prague. Tom has few recollections of life in Prague, but he does remember the German occupation: “What sticks in my childish memory is that the Czechs drove on the left hand side of the road, and the Germans on the right hand side. Suddenly, Prague was full of German military vehicles, and from one day to the next there was an order – ‘we are now going to be driving on the right in your city’. I wondered how they would ever sort it out, because Prague was very tram oriented and there were tram lines everywhere.”

While Tom worried about the traffic, his parents made plans to once again escape the German occupation. Kindertransport trains had been running since December 1938, moving Jewish children from Germany and Austria to safety in the United Kingdom. With the German invasion of Prague, transports were hastily arranged from here as well. In July 1939, Tom found himself on board one of the last Kindertransport trains to leave Czechoslovakia before war broke out.

“My last memories of Czechoslovakia are waving goodbye to my parents at Prague railway station. I really thought of my visit to England as a bit of a holiday trip and so I don’t remember great tears, although it must have been a traumatic occasion for my parents, who can’t have been sure that they would reach me, although they were hoping to get to England somehow.”

In fact, Tom’s parents did make it out of Czechoslovakia, to a city called Lvov, which was then in Poland. However, the war started in September 1939 and they became stranded as Lvov was occupied first by the Soviets, then by the Germans. “Apart from a few postcards, which somehow reached me through the Red Cross, I really never heard more from them, and they died in Auschwitz in the mid-to-late war period, about 1943 I guess.”



First Transport from Hook of Holland
December 1st 1938

“I would have died in the holocaust, without question. The Nazis didn’t differentiate between children, adults, grandparents...”

The Kindertransport train took Tom through Germany to the Hook of Holland, across to Harwich and from there to

Liverpool Street Station, where “all I remember is being in a large railway station hall and the children were all in one half of the room and adults who were meeting them were in the other half, and gradually we must have been sorted out into those we were going to be living with.”

Tom went to stay with English friends of his uncle in a sprawling house in rural Hampshire. “I guess I would have been a townie child, and now I was living in the heart of the country – a small village with one or two pubs, one or two shops, a church and that was it. The war started two or three months after I arrived there, and this large house became a reception area for refugee children and families and London evacuees, so the place was just overrun with people, and I can’t imagine how my foster mother coped.”

By the end of the war, Tom had come to know of his parents' deaths and accepted that he would stay in the UK for good. He gained British citizenship, did military service and went to university. In 1958 he married Pat, an English girl, and today they have three children and six grandchildren. Work brought them to Ipswich in 1968 and they have been here, living in the same house, ever since. In 2009 Tom was awarded an MBE for services to Conservation and Heritage in Suffolk. Today, there is a memorial to his parents in the garden behind Christchurch Mansion. Tom is in no doubt as to what would have happened if Britain had not accepted the Kindertransport children. "I would have died in the holocaust, without question. The Nazis didn't differentiate between children, adults, grandparents – they all finished in the furnaces unfortunately. I feel I've been very lucky that I escaped all the horrors of the war myself. Of course I've lost my parents and all my blood family. But I was lucky to be brought up in a very loving environment in a large family – there were four boys – and I was treated always as one of the sons. Now I'm 80 years old, all my foster brothers except the youngest have died and I'm the great survivor."

Kindertransport Facts

The Kindertransport was a rescue movement set up to send children, most of them Jewish, to safety in the UK from Germany, Austria, Poland and Czechoslovakia in the months before World War II. Sir Nicholas Winton, a British man, organised the Czech Kindertransport, which rescued 669 children from German-occupied Czechoslovakia. His humanitarian work remained undiscovered until 1988. Those he helped rescue, including Tom Gondris, became known as 'Winton's Children'.

- The British government agreed to admit Jewish children after the Kristallnacht ('Night of Broken Glass') pogrom on November 9-10th 1938.
- The first Kindertransport arrived at Harwich on December 2nd 1938, bringing 169 children from a Jewish orphanage in Berlin which had been burned by the Nazis.
- Nearly 10,000 children came to the UK on the Kindertransport. None were accompanied by parents, and most never saw their families again.
- Those children without a sponsor were sent to a holiday camp at Dovercourt, where they waited to be housed.
- There are Kindertransport memorials at Harwich and outside Liverpool St Station in London.
- Four Kindertransport children went on to become Nobel Prize winners. Sir Nicholas Winton died in 2015 aged 106. He has been called the 'British Schindler'.

Zahra's Story

The Iranian Revolution took place in early 1979. The unpopular regime of the Shah was overthrown and an Islamic Republic established, with Ayatollah Khomeini as Supreme Leader. However, within months critics of the new regime were being arrested and executed. Many fled into neighbouring Turkey and Pakistan. This is the story of Zahra, who left the country with her three children.

“It was a dark, rainy night. Bullets were flying over our heads and the horses were stampeding in all directions. My eldest child was running blindly across open space to reach me.”

“On the 20th June, 1981, the day of mass demonstrations in Iran against the regime of Ayatollah Khomeini, my husband went into hiding. He was a university lecturer and outspoken critic of the regime. I was forced to go with my three young children to my parents’ home. When that became unsafe too, I tried to find an apartment. It was very difficult as landlords had been ordered to report all new tenants to the Revolutionary security forces.

I made up a false identity and managed to find somewhere but, after four months, checks began and we had to flee. We lived in constant fear, hiding out at friends’ and relatives’ houses. When it became too dangerous, I decided to leave. My husband had already fled the country and the only solution was for us to do the same.

I found another woman in the same situation. I had three children aged 12, 8 and eleven months, and she would be accompanied by four, aged 13, 12, 10 and 7. Other women and children were due to join us in the coming days. The people arranging our illegal exit told us to take as little as possible for the journey, much of it by horse and donkey through mountainous Kurdistan.

We began in a village close to a border town. We had two guides who were supposed to give us tribal dresses so we would not be identified as city women. However, the security forces were very evident in the village and we had to jump into the back of a small van, cover ourselves up and flee to a safer area. There were 13 of us. We were ordered to keep quiet but my baby was frightened and began to cry. I covered her mouth with my hand so we would not be heard. When we arrived at the next village, the local inhabitants easily recognised us as city people.

Our guides felt we were in danger and quickly ordered us to where horses and mules were waiting. Some of us had just mounted when we heard loud shooting very close by. There was awful confusion. The villagers and our guides ran for cover and shouted for us to do the same. It was the Revolutionary Guards attacking – they must have trailed us to the village.

It was a dark, rainy night. Bullets were flying over our heads and the horses were stampeding in all directions. From where I was hiding, I could see a six-year-old boy clinging to one of the horses while screaming in fear. My eldest child was running blindly across open space to reach me. When the shooting stopped, I began frantically searching for my baby. I thought she must have been trampled by the horses. Finally, we found her in a village room. My eight-year-old daughter had been arrested and so had two of the children of the lady accompanying me. And we were left with a very frightened boy of six whose mother and sister had also been arrested.



The Revolutionary Guard execute the Shah's supporters -
Jahangir Razmi of Ettela'at, Iran

We had no time to think about what to do next. Our guides told us to get out of the village immediately as the Revolutionary Guards would return. A young village girl was told to lead us to the countryside. It was midnight and the children were crying. We were now two women with five children. It was cold and wet so we lay

huddled together to keep the children warm. It was a wild area, often inhabited by wolves, but we were more afraid of the Revolutionary Guards returning.

After an hour a boy came from the village and confirmed that all the missing had been arrested and taken to a nearby jail. He advised us to get on our way. He said we should go through the narrow mountain passes by night to get to some huts on the other side before daylight.

We set out on foot. The children were hungry and thirsty. Everything had been left behind in the village – we had no food or water. We found a river but the water was too muddy to drink. We didn't know what to do. Then, in the early morning hours, the boy who had visited us earlier returned with some bread and water for the children. He told us the Revolutionary Guards had returned to search the village. He said we needed horses but no one would give them without money, and we had no money with us.

We decided to go back to the village despite the boy's message that all entrances to it were being watched. We waited until 9.30pm and made our way back. We were going to plead with the villagers to hide us. If they wouldn't, we planned to hand ourselves over to the Revolutionary Guards. The villagers were not pleased to see us. They had been warned that if they hid us again, their village would be bombed.

They kept telling us to get out. Finally, we went to the edge of the village and laid the exhausted children under some trees.

Our luggage was brought to us and we set out again, but whenever we passed a village we were quickly told to move on. They were too afraid to hide us. Finally, one of our guides caught up with us; he had managed to obtain some horses. We were all tired and we had eaten only a little bread and some yoghurt. Once, along the way, I had made a little of my baby's cereal with water and given each child a small taste. They lapped it up as if it was the most magnificent meal in the world.

The guide was in a hurry to move us out of the area as quickly as possible. As he kicked his horse along the side of steep mountain passes, I saw my daughter's horse, following behind, suddenly slip. She was clinging on. It seemed as though the horse was going to go sideways into the ravine, but it managed to right its feet and get a grip in the dust.

Finally, we reached an encampment of members of an opposition group next to the Turkish border. They gave us food and clothes and a tent to rest in. After such a nightmare, their kindness warmed us. They also sent someone to contact our next guide to take us on into Turkey. When we got near the border I could not stop my tears; I did not want to leave Iran. I was forced to leave and I didn't want to."

Eventually Zahra joined her husband in the UK, where they were granted refugee status. But it took two years before she was reunited with the daughter who had been arrested as they escaped Iran. Twenty years ago her husband got a job with British Telecom and the family moved to Ipswich, where all three daughters attended Northgate High School.

Iran – Country Profile

- The 1979 Iranian Revolution overthrew the monarchy and established an Islamic Republic.
- Tens of thousands were arrested, imprisoned and executed under the new regime.
- Opposition parties were banned, newspapers closed and universities purged.
- Many doctors, teachers and scientists fled the country, leading to a 'brain drain' which continues today.
- Iran is still a theocratic country with limited freedoms and strict social codes.
- Iran has one of the highest execution rates in the world, with almost 1000 people put to death in 2015, according to the UN. It has been criticised for the execution of minors, public executions and stonings.
- Iran produced the most asylum applicants (4192) to the UK in 2016.
- Christians, homosexuals and Kurds are all oppressed minorities in Iran.

Z's Story

One evening in 2005, Z was taking the bush road to his home in Chitungwiza, near Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe. He could hear people coming towards him. They were singing rebel songs, songs of the infamous War Veterans – supporters of the ruling ZANU-PF party. Before he could do anything, there were 30 or 40 of them just metres away from him.

“They asked me to do the ZANU-PF slogan, which I was aware of. I did it and they were about to let me go when one of them recognised me. He said ‘I know this guy, he is an MDC supporter’. I realised I was in real trouble. They dragged me to the district office; that’s where I was beaten. I’ve got the marks of the sjambok (a leather whip) all over my body. They were taking turns beating me up. That’s when I realised my life was in danger.”

They dumped Z by the gate. He doesn’t know who picked him up; all he remembers is being in hospital, badly swollen and with broken bones. And this was not the first time it had happened. A couple of years earlier, soldiers had taken him and a group of friends to an army base and beaten them so badly one of his friends died from his injuries.

“They were taking turns beating me up. That’s when I realised my life was in danger.”

The problems had started in 1999, when he was at high school. Zimbabwe was struggling economically and the regime of Robert Mugabe and his ZANU-PF party was becoming increasingly ruthless. That year the opposition MDC (Movement for Democratic Change) party was formed. Z and his friends started putting up posters and distributing leaflets for the MDC. “We knew we were putting ourselves at risk, but we wanted a change in our country.”

However, Mugabe clung to power at the 2000 elections amid widespread allegations of fraud and intimidation. Violence escalated across the country, inflation became rampant and there were severe food shortages.

By now, Z was at the University of Zimbabwe and taking orders from the chairman of the MDC Youth Assembly. “We would distribute leaflets and posters at night for our safety, because there were people in the community who used to gossip and give information to the soldiers. So it wasn’t easy and it wasn’t safe, but we had no option. I can’t put into words how much we suffered. There was no water, sewage was flowing everywhere and we had nothing to eat. We were used to a life where we had been free, but all of a sudden everything changed. That’s why we had to do anything we could.”

“One day there was an unplanned demo. We took the opportunity to loot because

we were hungry. We broke into shops, vandalised everything to show how angry we were. We were aiming to get to the town house, where the Mugabe residence is, but we couldn't get there because of the police and the War Vets. The only weapons we had were stones, whilst they started using rubber bullets and later on live ammunition. Two of my friends were killed. I watched people being killed in front of me, but I couldn't do anything. I think there were 200 youths killed on that day. It was a massacre, but no one was there to record it, no international journalists were allowed."

"I can't erase the memory of my friends who are dead now because we tried to fight for freedom."

By 2005, Z was being targeted individually. After the beating and hospitalisation, he decided to leave the country. His wife was studying in America, but there was no functioning US Embassy in Zimbabwe at the time. Instead, she applied successfully for an exchange program with the University of Essex and Z was able to get a short term UK visa to join her.

However, his problems were not over yet. "The night that I was supposed to be leaving, two guys came to my place. They were wearing MDC t-shirts – I didn't realise they were



Zimbabwean Refugees in Mozambique - UNHCR

ZANU-PF supporters. Outside the gate there were about 6 or 7 of them; they took me away and questioned me about my intention of leaving. I don't know how they knew I'd applied for a visa. I told them I wasn't going anywhere. They said they would come back with me to the house to search for my passport. Luckily enough I was going to collect the passport later on before I left for the airport. When they couldn't find it, they left me and said I should report to them in the morning. But this was my getaway."

On his arrival in the UK, Z sought asylum. Having fled arbitrary arrest and intimidation, he was shocked at his reception. "The day I arrived in the UK I was put into a detention centre. Overnight I wasn't given any food, until after my interview the next day when they gave me a sandwich and a cup of tea. No one can understand how difficult it is to seek asylum.

I was harassed, shouted at, called a liar by the immigration officers. They even said you need to go back to your country, because there's no place for you here. The way they do the interviews, you feel as if you're being interrogated."

In spite of this, the evidence was so strong that it took just three weeks for Z to be granted refugee status. Today, he has completed a degree, works as a social worker and lives locally with his wife, a human rights lawyer. But he can't forget what he has lost. "What happened to me during those days, I can't erase the memory. Every time I think of them, every time I think of my friends who are dead now because we tried to fight for freedom, it's just so traumatising."



Zimbabwean Refugees in Mozambique - UNHCR

While he appreciates the protection he has been given in the UK and says that Ipswich is a fantastic place to live, one day he would like to help rebuild his own country. "We're planning to go back home if things change, because that's where I was born and that's where my roots are. We need to make Zimbabwe a better place to live".

Zimbabwe – Country Profile

- Zimbabwe gained independence from minority white rule in 1980.
- Robert Mugabe became prime minister and has remained in power ever since. His rule has become increasingly authoritarian and brutal.
- Zimbabwe used to be known as the 'bread basket of Africa', exporting wheat and corn.
- Mugabe's land reform programme led to the collapse of the economy and food shortages.
- Hundreds of thousands of Zimbabweans have emigrated, including many well-educated professionals.
- It is estimated that a quarter of Zimbabwe's population had fled by 2007, mostly to South Africa.
- Draconian laws are used to clamp down on critical journalism and comment

David's Story

Imagine a chance meeting turning your life upside down. One day you're doing a job you enjoy, making good money and living happily with your family. The next you are running for your life, unsure if you will see your wife and children again.

This is what happened to David. He was an officer in the army of an East African state, with ten years of unblemished service. During his time as an officer he had made friends with various colleagues. One of these friends left the army and went

“I did not think of what was ahead of me. I was thinking of my little children, I was thinking of my family – will I ever see them again?”

on to become leader of the country's main opposition political party. Some years later, David saw him again, setting off a chain of events he could never have imagined.

“It was a recreation place, people playing pool, playing darts, drinking, chatting about their day-to-day affairs. So we happened to meet; it was not a premeditated meeting. I wasn't in politics – being in the army I was not allowed to engage in politics. But there was no way I could avoid this person; we just bumped into each other and had a chat, saying ‘hello, long time’, that sort of thing.”

David was aware of government suspicions that the opposition leader was trying to create factions within the army. However, because it was a social situation, he had no idea they were being spied upon. The next day, he was in his office at the army camp when he was asked to account for his movements the previous evening. “Being in the army for ten years, that was a familiar phrase – ‘to account’. I'd seen people being asked ‘to account’ on various issues, and they were always referred to a ‘safe house’, which is a euphemism for torture chamber. So automatically I knew that something was wrong. I was asked by the intelligence officer, and I knew about his inhuman ways of retrieving information from people.”

“Their techniques are horrible. There's what they call ‘weighing your potential’. If the interrogating officer tells you that, boy you'd say anything, just make it up. ‘Weighing your potential’ involves tying two kilos on your testicles and then asking you to stand, and when you stand these 2 kilos hang. Another thing they would call a ‘manicure’, which is using pliers to pluck out your nails.”

“I knew exactly what would happen if I stayed. I knew the conditions we were working in, but I will stress that because I was strict, I had stayed clear of anything which would lead me into trouble. But now I had to think of how to leave the camp immediately.”

In this heightened state of danger, David phoned a friend who was a government

official. “He asked me whether my car was there and I said yes. He advised me to leave my car keys in my office, leave the car, and find a way out. So what I had to do was injure myself. I got a piece of sharp metal and injured myself on my right arm. I told the guards I need to rush to the pharmacy to dress this – because they were ordinary soldiers they didn’t know what was taking place, so they said ‘ok sir’. I dressed my wound and rushed to this person’s office. Nobody knew where I was by then”.

David explained all that had happened. He was advised his only option was to leave



East Africa - UNHCR

the country. Although his friend was a member of the ruling government, “he trusted and confided in me. This person knew that I wouldn’t put his job at risk.” He was given civilian clothes and a letter from his friend, and taken to the consulate to apply for a visa. He didn’t know which country the visa would

be for. In the meantime, he went back to his friend’s place and was told “don’t go to your house, don’t tell anyone where you are, don’t call anybody, don’t answer the phone.”

David hid for two weeks while he waited for the visa to be issued. His wife was told that he was safe, but not where he was or what had happened. Eventually he was given a visa for the UK, and arrangements were made for him to leave immediately. He was asked whether he knew how to board a plane without being noticed. “Because I’d been in the army, I knew how to beat the security. So I said we should get a plane that leaves at night, and it should be between 9 and 10 – not earlier, not later – because that’s when the guards are changed, and in that period of time it’s not as strict as other hours.”

And so David found himself on a plane bound for Heathrow. “I remember when boarding that plane I was totally confused. To be honest, I did not think of what was ahead of me. I was thinking of my little children, I was thinking of my family, will I ever see them again? I left the country, but it was the body leaving. My soul and mind were back with my children, my family.”

David’s initial application for asylum in the UK was refused. While waiting for an appeal hearing, his accommodation was transferred to Ipswich. His appeal was successful in September 2009, but it took a further lengthy legal battle before he was reunited with his family. David has since gone on to degree studies in London.



East Africa - UNHCR

The 1951 Refugee Convention

A refugee is a person, who, 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such a fear, is unwilling to, avail themselves of the protection of that country...' (The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees)

- After World War II, millions of people were displaced across the globe.
- The United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees was approved on 28th July 1951.
- The Convention defined what a 'refugee' was, and set out the rights and responsibilities of refugees.
- Initially it was intended to protect European refugees in the aftermath of World War II, but was later expanded by a 1967 Protocol.
- British lawyers played a key role in drafting the Convention, and Britain was one of the first countries to sign.
- A total of 147 states have signed up to the Convention (or Protocol). No country has ever withdrawn from it.
- It is estimated that the Convention has helped to protect 50 million people.
- Under international law, anyone has the right to apply for asylum in any country which has signed the 1951 Convention and to remain there until the authorities have assessed their claim.
- In 2001, 126 countries signed a declaration acknowledging the 'relevance and enduring importance' of the 1951 Convention.
- In 2015, the total number of refugees worldwide of concern to the UNHCR stood at 21.3 million.

Aram's Story

In many ways, Aram's story is typical of the thousands of Kurds who have fled the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan. When your people have been denied a homeland and basic rights, had their language suppressed and chemical weapons used against them, it is hard not to become politicised and join in the struggle for freedom.

“Twice we lost everything in our house, all our possessions. If you are not strong, you lose yourself as well.”



Kurdish Refugees in Turkey - UNHCR

Aram was brought up with his five sisters and four brothers in a village near the town of Chwarqurna in the northeast of Iraq. He became politically aware at a young age. “As I grew up, I realised we do not have our own government or free land. When I went from our village to the town to start secondary school, I saw Arabic soldiers speaking the Arabic language and we always had to show our ID. We understood they are not our soldiers, their power is not our power. They tried to stop us speaking Kurdish in the high schools and universities.”

In the mountainous regions of Kurdistan, an armed force fought against Saddam Hussein's soldiers. But it was dangerous to even talk about them. “We didn't know what the Peshmerga was; we could not ask my father or my brother to describe them, because we are children and if we talk about it they could be arrested. If you had contact with Peshmerga they would arrest you, you would disappear forever. Slowly we understood what the Peshmerga is – they try to get freedom.”

Aram was still a child when Saddam Hussein's regime launched the 'Al-Anfal' campaign of genocide against the Iraqi Kurds. Thousands of villages were systematically destroyed and tens of thousands of people killed. Still the Kurdish resistance continued and, following the Gulf War, in 1991 a rebellion started close to where Aram lived. He was too young to take part in the fighting, but watched as Kurdish forces gained control of the region.

However, the US failed to offer support and the Iraqi army crushed the uprising. An estimated 1.5 million Kurds fled into the mountains and across the border into Iran and Turkey. A 'no-fly zone' was imposed to protect civilians, and Kurdistan gained autonomy. In 1992 there were elections, with the vote split evenly between the two Kurdish parties – the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP).

By this time, Aram was at high school. The two parties in the Kurdish Regional Government started fighting, with much of the conflict centred around the PUK stronghold of Sulaymaniyah – Aram’s local city. It became impossible for him not to get involved and take sides. “We don’t want to be political, but our situation made us political. I was supporting the PUK, while some of my friends and family supported the KDP.”

As Kurdistan descended into civil war, Aram was drawn into the conflict and joined the Peshmerga. “When fighting started

between the two parties, lots of young people died. I’m lucky I’m still alive. There were times when bombs were landing all around me. I saw people dying; I saw Turkish planes attack the Peshmerga and kill them. I’ve got lots of bitter stories. More than 5000 guys were killed between these two parties without those killed between Saddam Hussein and Kurdish forces.”

“Twice we lost everything in our house, all our possessions. We built everything and we lost it again. If you are not strong, you lose yourself as well. My father’s life was all war – I needed to go somewhere to start my own life. My father told me to leave.



Kurdish Refugees in Turkey - UNHCR

Iraqi Kurdistan – Recent Timeline

- From 1986-89, towards the end of the Iran/Iraq war, Iraqi forces launch the ‘Al-Anfal’ campaign of genocide against the Iraqi Kurds. More than 2,000 villages are destroyed and 182,000 people killed.
- In 1988, thousands of Kurdish civilians are killed in a poison gas attack on the town of Halabja.
- In 1991, a Kurdish uprising against Saddam Hussein is crushed. Millions of people are displaced.
- Under international protection, Iraqi Kurdistan becomes effectively autonomous. Elections are held to the Kurdish Regional Government, with the PUK and KDP splitting the vote.
- From 1994-1998, fighting between the PUK and KDP descends into civil war.
- In 2005 an alliance of Kurdish parties comes second in Iraqi elections. PUK leader Jalal Talabani is elected Iraqi president, with KDP leader Massoud Barzani president of the Kurdish Regional Government.
- Iraqi Kurdistan (pop: 8.3 million) is host to more than 250,000 Syrian refugees, in addition to 1.5 million internally displaced persons.

So these troubles pushed me out of Kurdistan.”

Like most Kurds, Aram did not have a passport. So his only option was to escape illegally. After an arduous journey, Aram eventually arrived in the UK. “I didn’t know where I was until I got off the lorry, somewhere around Ipswich.

I thought my English was not bad, but when I got to England there was a different sound, a different accent – I could understand nothing. Then I realised my English was not so good!”

“We don’t want to be political, but our situation made us political.”

Aram had been told that English people could be hostile to asylum seekers. But he remembers being shown kindness. “Soon after I arrived in Ipswich, I was in the town centre and I asked a guy where Lidl was, and he came with me all the way from the town centre to Lidl. I cannot forget that guy who came with me. What I was told about English people and what I saw were two different things.”

To let his parents know he was safe, Aram passed messages through friends; the first mobile phone didn’t arrive in his village until a year later. Adjusting to independent life in the UK

was a real challenge. “I had never left my family for more than seven days before, so it was very difficult. It was not easy to live with people you don’t know, people with different languages and culture, but we tried to make a balance and start a single life.”

“Cleaning and shopping were difficult. I had never cooked before. Everything

you needed you had to do yourself. It wasn’t like that in my country – I was just a student. There were lots of laws I didn’t know. When I was walking along the road, I used to stop at traffic lights if they were red!”

Aram moved to Ipswich in 2002. He has studied and worked and become a British citizen. He is still involved in the struggles of Kurdistan and writes a political blog on a Kurdish website. But Ipswich is his home now. “I know Ipswich like my village. I know all the roads; I know lots of English people and when I walk I say hello. I couldn’t leave Ipswich now, I’m very happy.”



Kurdish Refugees in Turkey - UNHCR



Map of Kurdistan

The Kurdish People

- 30-35 million Kurds live in a contiguous area covered by Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Armenia.
- They have been oppressed by neighbouring peoples for most of their history.
- The break-up of the Ottoman Empire after World War I led to the creation of Iraq and Syria, and a proposed Kurdish state – this was never implemented as Turkey, Iraq and Iran refused to recognise it.
- All subsequent attempts to set up an independent Kurdish state have been defeated.
- Divisions between Kurdish communities have hampered attempts to gain greater freedom and independence.
- There are an estimated 1.3 million Kurds living in Western Europe, with the largest number in Germany.

Nahid & M's Story

For teenagers in the UK, life often revolves around school, the internet, socialising or listening to music. In fact, these are all things which we take for granted. It's hard for us to imagine a life without education, opportunity or enjoyment. But this was the reality for an Afghan girl under the Taliban regime.

M doesn't remember a time when Afghanistan was peaceful. She was born after Soviet troops entered the country in 1979, and lived through the struggles that followed. "I don't have any good memories from my childhood. I remember since I was a child there was fighting, there was no freedom, and we couldn't go outside to play like other children. When I was about six or seven years old my mum told us 'stay at home, don't go outside.'"

"Sometimes I think an animal had a better life than us. We were alive but we didn't have any freedom to do what we want."

M's mother, Nahid, experienced a very different Afghanistan. Born in the capital, Kabul, she remembers fondly the mountains and visits to the museum. Growing up at a time when women wore western clothes and went to university alongside men, she studied history and became a high school teacher.

But this all changed after 1991, when the mujahideen, who had been fighting the Soviet troops, took control of the country. Nahid was forced to give up her job. "It started when the mujahideen came to Kabul. All the women started to wear the burqa, they were not allowed to go to school or university or have a job outside. Women were told they must look after the children at home, they must do the cooking and cleaning."



Afghan women used to be educated, before the Taliban arrived - UNHCR

"I felt maybe I am dead, because every day I sat at home and could not go to my job. It doesn't state in the Koran that

women are not allowed to go to school or work; I never learned this. When I was a small girl I went to the mosque, I learned, but the teacher never said you're not allowed to go to school or to speak with men, or to work with men."

Her daughter, M, was a teenager when the Taliban took control of most of Afghanistan in 1996. She says things got even worse then. "When the Taliban came to Kabul nobody dared to go outside, not just women but men also. I didn't even go into the garden to see what the colour of the sky was because I'd never worn a

headscarf and I wouldn't go outside with one. When I was a child, before the Taliban came, I always used to wear jeans."

However, it was not just the prospect of covering up which made M afraid to leave the house. There was another, more sinister, reason. "We could go outside with my father, but I didn't dare because I heard them say that all girls of 14 or 15 years have to marry, and I was scared that if they know that I am 15 or 16 maybe something will happen, so I stayed at home. Because I didn't have any choice; if they come and say that your daughter has to marry, you couldn't say no. They don't ask, they say 'she's ready'."

"What is the difference between us and other women? We are the same, but we were unlucky to be born there."

So from 1996 to 1999, M did not leave the house. For three whole years, when girls her age in other countries would be studying for exams, getting boyfriends and thinking about university, she was a virtual prisoner in her own home. "Sometimes I think an animal had a better life than us. We were alive but we didn't have any



Afghanistan after 1985 Soviet War - Erwin Franzen

freedom to do what we want. We stayed at home and we hadn't anything to enjoy in our lives. We weren't allowed to listen to music and there weren't any TV programmes, just every day the Koran on the radio. Jail would have been better than this – we were inside and nobody knew we were there."

M's parents had both been involved in campaigning for more freedom in Afghanistan, particularly for women and young people. This put them in danger, but M says they stayed as long as they could. "We thought that maybe next year will be better, maybe next year the situation in Afghanistan will change, but when we saw it's worse than last year, we had to move. They saw that I missed a lot of years of my life, and they didn't want that to happen with my sister and younger brothers, and that's why we had to leave the country. We have a sentence in our language that we want to stand on our own feet."

The family left Afghanistan in 1999 and travelled for one year, "by car, by boat, by aeroplane, by foot. We never thought about where we were, where we were going

or how long it would take, because we were happy that we moved from this country, that we have freedom.” In 2000 they arrived in the Netherlands, where eventually they were granted refugee status and Dutch citizenship. They moved to Ipswich in 2008.




Afghan Woman - UNHCR

M dreamed that she would go to university in the UK. But she has still not been able to make up for the education she was denied. “Sometimes I am jealous of women from other countries. I say ‘what is the difference between us and other women? Why did we not get any opportunities?’ And I ask myself a lot of questions about why, why are we born in Afghanistan, why is there so much difference between us and ladies from other countries. What is the difference? We are the same, but we were unlucky to be born there.”


Afghanistan – Country Profile

- Due to its strategic location, the land of Afghanistan has been fought over for centuries.
- The country has been in a continuous state of war for over 30 years, creating one of the largest and longest running refugee situations in the world.
- The first large wave of Afghan refugees occurred after Soviet troops entered Afghanistan in 1979.
- Many more left in the 1980s to escape the Mujahideen.
- The numbers of refugees increased dramatically after the Taliban came to power in the 1990s.
- Afghanistan was the second-largest refugee source country at the end of 2015, behind Syria
- At the end of 2015, the UNHCR estimated there to be 2.7 million Afghan refugees worldwide, 95% of whom were hosted by Pakistan and Iran.
- There are an estimated 50-70,000 Afghans in the UK.



We would like to thank all those who contributed
their stories.

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Suffolk Refugee Support is a small, local charity, established in 1999, working to provide practical advice and support for Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Suffolk.

We are a registered charity and rely entirely on grants and donations to run our services.

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