




# REFUGEE STORIES








Refugees have made great cultural, social and economic contributions to life in the UK for more than 400 years, since the Huguenots first brought the word 'refugee' into the English language. In Suffolk they have helped preserve our architectural heritage, served as Mayors, doctors and teachers, brought business entrepreneurialism and energy, and enriched our cultural and culinary landscape.

Since Suffolk Refugee Support was set up in 1999, refugees fleeing conflict and persecution across the world have come to our door for support. Often we have been the first friendly face and listening ear they have found. As we continue to welcome into our communities people uprooted from their homes and separated from their loved ones, we look at some of the individual stories of those forced to make unimaginable choices and how they have rebuilt their lives here.



Some names have been changed to protect identities

## Tom's Story

Tom Gondris passed away in 2019, a few months short of his 90th birthday. His life story is that of a 9-year-old refugee who became a leading figure in Ipswich civic life – a story of separation and loss, but above all, survival and achievement.

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 remembered 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 had few recollections of life in Prague, but he did 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 woman, and they went on to have three children. Work brought them to Ipswich in 1968 and they lived there in the same house until Tom's death. Tom served as an Ipswich Borough Councillor and chairman of the Ipswich Buildings Preservation Trust, the Suffolk Architectural Preservation Trust and the River Action Group (looking after the River Gipping). 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."

### 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', and his story is immortalised in the 2023 film *One Life*.
- In December 2018 Suffolk Refugee Support took part in a commemoration event at Harwich to mark the 80th anniversary of the arrival of the first Kindertransport train

## 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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. We were left with a very frightened boy of six whose mother and sister had also been arrested.



The baby bottle given to Zahra by one of the villagers on their journey

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 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 reach 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.

During our journey through the mountains, we lost our luggage. In that luggage was my baby's bottle. I was crying my eyes out saying, 'How can I feed her? What can I do?' One of the villagers got me one of those tiny, primitive baby bottles. I was so thankful. I said, 'Whenever I come back, I will come and repay all your kindness'. But we have never been able to go back and I don't know what happened to them. That bottle I kept and still have.

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. It took two years to be reunited with the daughter who was arrested as they escaped Iran. The family moved to Ipswich in 1988, where all three daughters attended high school. One is now CEO of a national charity supporting refugees.***

### Iran – Country Profile

- The 1979 Iranian Revolution overthrew the repressive and corrupt regime of the Shah (the monarchy) and established an Islamic Republic
- Tens of thousands were arrested, imprisoned and executed under the new regime, with opposition parties banned and universities purged
- Many doctors, teachers and scientists fled the country, leading to a 'brain drain' which continues today
- Iran has one of the highest execution rates in the world, with executions estimated to have more than doubled in 2025 to over 1,500
- Mass demonstrations broke out across the country in 2022, often under the slogan 'Woman, Life, Freedom', following the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman who was detained by morality police in Tehran for allegedly wearing her hijab "improperly"
- The largest uprising against the regime since the Islamic Revolution took place in early 2026, with many thousands killed in the ensuing crackdown
- Christians, LGBTQ+ people, Kurds and Baha'is are all persecuted in Iran

## V's story

V is a Tamil from the north of Sri Lanka. From her earliest days there was conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE, or Tamil Tigers, who fought for an independent Tamil state. V's father was a writer and poet who sometimes worked with the rebels and wrote pieces against the government.

V was first displaced in 1988 when she was a child, and from that day her family were forced to move from place to place, with V changing school every few months, living in fear and never settling long enough to make friends.

After taking her A-Levels, she began working for the humanitarian NGO Médecins Sans Frontières as a medical interpreter. In 2002 she got married and the same year the government and LTTE signed a ceasefire agreement. For a while things were peaceful, and V began working for Save the Children on a project supporting children recruited as child soldiers by the LTTE.

In 2006 V's father died. At his funeral he was honoured by the leader of the LTTE, and this was published on the internet, putting the family in danger once again. Amid rising tensions and the breakdown of the ceasefire, V, who by now had a young son, was forced to move again.

***“The fire started like rain. The army were just shooting, they didn't have any aim. It was like in a movie.”***

In 2008 the war re-started and all the NGOs left the conflict area as their compounds were attacked. V had worked for Save the Children for four years and was devastated: “The people were really helpless at that time, it was really hard. I loved that work. When I saw the (Save the Children) symbol erased by paint I was really crying.”

Some of the local staff tried to continue working with the vulnerable children, taking musical instruments on their bikes for singing and dancing sessions, but the government attacks intensified, food became scarce and nobody was able to move. People were living in tents, but heavy rains led to flooding and many people lost what few possessions they had managed to hold on to.

One day, V, her husband and a friend went by motorbike to the Save the Children compound, which was in an area of fierce fighting, to get a satellite phone and clothes for women and children. They tied all they could carry to the two motorbikes but as they left, “the fire started like rain; the bullets were passing through the air as we came out. The army were just shooting, they didn't have any aim. It was like in a movie.”

V and her family – by now including a one-and-a-half year-old daughter – were forced to move nearly every week or two to avoid the shelling, eventually ending up in a coastal area that was supposed to be a ‘no-fire zone’. But the violence followed

them and the displaced people were forced to dig toilets, wells and bunkers to live in on the beaches where they were stranded.

Among the many challenges V faced was her young son continually asking “Mama, when will you let me play outside?”. Other children who had left their bunkers had been shot dead. By August 2009 there was so much fighting that V thought they might not survive much longer. Determined to celebrate her son’s birthday, she managed to make a birthday cake, complete with candles, in their bunker.

***“My son was walking through dead bodies. We saw lots of bodies floating in the water. My son still remembers them.”***

As it became increasingly dangerous to move, at one point, after three days in the bunker, during a break in the shelling V went above ground to use the makeshift toilet. “When I was sitting there, I could hear the sound of the shells coming. Before I could stand up, 16 shells were blasting around me. I could see sparks everywhere and hear the sound of pieces flying. I ran out and my husband pulled me to the bunker.” The toilet, made of corrugated iron, was badly damaged, but incredibly V was unscathed.

The family moved one last time, and V describes seeing people sleeping in the road, their faces blank, having lost everything and given up hope. Walking in the dark and the mud, it



V’s son, with birthday cake, in the bunker where they hid from the shelling

was not until daylight that V looked down at her legs and realised that she had been wading through other people’s blood. She says: “My son, who was five years old, he was walking through dead bodies. We saw lots of bodies floating in the water. My son still remembers them.”

Eventually they had no choice but to give themselves up to the army. They were moved to a camp in a nearby forest where it was hot and overcrowded, people were weak and starving and V contracted a fever and became ill with malaria.

V’s family were held in the camp for six months. They were interrogated by the army and security services before their release, at which point they went to live with her mother-in-law, but within one week the security services came looking for them, having heard that V had been working with a foreign NGO helping child soldiers.

Realising that Sri Lanka was unsafe for her, V successfully applied for a student visa to study health and social care at St Patrick's College, London. Leaving her children with her husband, she came to the UK. Six months later, she returned home for a visit to see her children. Travelling north to visit her sister, V was again stopped by security services and mistreated.

Having boarded a flight back to the UK the same day, she claimed asylum, but missing her children, traumatised by her experiences and feeling alone, V became depressed and twice tried to take her own life. Dispersed to Leeds by the Home Office, her asylum claim was initially refused, but in January 2014, after two and a half years, eventually her appeal was successful.

V's family joined her in the UK in June 2014, three years after she had last seen them. She says: "It was really exciting. I was counting the days until they were coming. I didn't believe that it was going to happen because for three years I felt really hopeless. Still I feel I am not released from all those tensions."

V moved to Ipswich, where a friend lived, and volunteered with Suffolk Refugee Support before becoming a much-valued member of the staff team as Trainee Support Worker. She also explored her experiences through artwork, discovering a hidden talent in the process!

Today, V's son is doing his GCSEs and, with one-to-one support from an SRS volunteer, his science skills have improved so much that he recently received the school award for chemistry. Her eldest daughter has demonstrated a real talent for poetry while a younger daughter was recently crowned maths 'Multiplication Queen' at her school.

Reflecting on her story, V says: "Now, my life is peaceful and calm. I feel safe in England. I am proud that I can take care of myself and my family. I hope in the future that I can lead my children to have a successful life. When I look back at my experiences, I feel proud that I have overcome the pain and depression. I am grateful for all the help from Suffolk Refugee Support."

### Sri Lankan Civil War

- The Sri Lankan Civil War lasted from 1983-2009, killing an estimated 100,000 civilians
- An estimated 40,000 Tamils were killed in the final stages of the war
- According to Amnesty International, by the end of the conflict 300,000 internally displaced people had been transferred to camps and detained against their will
- The population of British Sri Lankan Tamils is around 100-200,000
- One third of Sri Lankan Tamils now live outside Sri Lanka

## Francois' Story

***Francois is a survivor of the Rwandan genocide. This is his story in his own words.***

My story can be given several titles. Some would say it is a tragic story, while others might say it is a story of survival. I call it a story of good overcoming evil.

After the genocide of Jews by the Nazis, the world vowed that genocide would never happen again. However, years passed and 25 years ago, to be exact, war and genocide tore apart the country of Rwanda in 1994.

Rwanda is a small country in central eastern Africa formed by three tribal groups, the major two of which are Hutus and Tutsis. In 1959 the Hutus took power from the Tutsis and some Tutsis were killed while others were forced into exile in different countries including Uganda. They were not allowed back to Rwanda. In 1990 a group of mostly Tutsi Rwandans decided to fight for their right to come back to the country. They attacked Rwanda from Uganda and all the Tutsis inside Rwanda became a target for the authorities. In 1994 a plane carrying the then president of Rwanda was shot down. The Rwandan army and extremist Hutus blamed the Tutsis for the downing of the plane. It was decided that all Tutsis must die. My mother was a Tutsi and my father was a Hutu.

I was young, and I did not understand all of the above, but what I do know is that before the genocide in Rwanda I had a big happy family. In our village, we knew each other. As children we would eat wherever we found others eating. It was a beautiful life, drinking fresh milk straight from the cow and with banana plantations everywhere; I lived a beautiful and happy childhood like any other Rwandan child.



***“You must disappear now. All your family is dead and your house destroyed.”***

But this changed completely one evening when I was coming back home from looking after our cows. A neighbour met me away from home and whispered to me: “You must disappear now; all your family is gone. They came to kill the Tutsis and all your family is dead and your house destroyed.” It was an unimaginable feeling. At the age of ten I started to wander around, from bush to bush in hiding without knowing where I am or what I am doing. I did not know how long I had been in the bush as I did not have any sense of time. Basically, I was walking dead, and I could smell the death. At this time Tutsis were being hunted like animals just because of how they were born. Apart from being hunted because of my mum’s tribe, I was hunted also because the killers knew that I was still alive. Once they are finished with me then they can be sure that no one was left to claim our land.

I stayed wandering in the bushes for days without food or drink, surviving on leaves, until I was found by the Red Cross and taken into an orphanage. During this time, I experienced the worst things a human can imagine, jumping over dead bodies, nothing to eat or drink. I was dead.

In the orphanage, I met other children and slowly started to adjust to my new life until one morning the killers struck again. A group of children I was part of were preparing breakfast, when people with machetes and guns suddenly appeared and we were ordered to go to the school ground. They were beating us and shouting at us as we ran there.

When we arrived, my best friend was not there; he was killed alongside other children and some grown-ups who looked after us. They were Tutsis and had been betrayed by the people we knew. For some reason, the killers decided to leave in a hurry with a truck full of people, some dead, others still breathing. From that day I became silent. I lost my speech, I could not speak or cry, I could not sleep. Many things happened afterwards.

***“I lost my speech, I  
could not speak or cry,  
I could not sleep...I  
lost all trust in  
humankind and I  
could not talk to  
anyone.”***



Rwandan refugees in the Democratic Republic of Congo

After the genocide, the orphanage was struggling to cope with the number of lone children. At around 16 I was on the streets of Kigali, the capital city, living on my own and still unable to speak, to cry or sleep. I had no home, it was destroyed. I had no family, nothing, and I could not bear to see the place where I was born. I lost all trust in humankind and I could not talk to anyone. Until the day I met a British missionary, who is the reason I'm here today. If it was not for this encounter, I would have died like many of my street children friends who died of drugs, sickness and other things. He enabled me to go back to school; I grew up and got married and a chance opened for me to come to the UK. I claimed asylum in 2011 and I had to wait two and a half painful years to get refugee status. During this time the support from Suffolk Refugee Support and my church was amazing. I was not able to sleep for many years and I was helped by the counselling I received in this country, in Ipswich.

As I said at the beginning, good can overcome evil. It is the British people I live with today who gave me a reason to believe and trust humans again. I met wonderful people in my church, in the community and at the University of Suffolk, where I completed my degree in social work a year ago. All these people have rebuilt my personality again. They have made me the new person I am today. Knowing where I come from, I can show kindness to humanity and support those in need. That is what makes me feel happy and complete.

I don't pretend that there are no challenges. As a survivor and a refugee, you are always faced with the trauma of not feeling that you have a safe place to call home. Rwanda has changed since 1994, but I still have nightmares and fear when I think about that country. I might be settled in the UK, I might know that it is safe here, I might have a beautiful family and a church family around us. However, fear, flashbacks and nightmares never go away; I just learned to manage them. This is my story, but there are many more like this out there.

***Francois lives in Ipswich with his wife, who volunteers with Suffolk Refugee Support, and children. Having successfully completed a Social Work degree at the University of Suffolk (in his second language), today he is a social worker. He also speaks publicly and works with local schools to raise awareness of the Rwandan genocide and refugee issues.***

### Rwandan Genocide

- Over 100 days between April and July 1994, around 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed, including 70% of the Tutsi population
- The majority of killings in the countryside were carried out by civilians, with an estimated 200,000 people participating in the genocide. Hutus were allowed to appropriate the land of the Tutsis they killed.
- In the aftermath of the violence, 2 million people, mainly Hutus, fled across the border into the Democratic Republic of Congo—thousands died of cholera
- An estimated 250,000-500,000 women were raped during the genocide
- Of the survivors, an estimated 75,000 were children who lost one or both parents
- The genocide has contributed to decades of conflict in neighbouring DRC, with the current Rwandan regime often implicated

## **Abed & G's story**

When you are living in a war zone, the difference between life and death can be luck, or a matter of a few inches. Abed, his wife G and their three children could have become just another set of casualties in a Syrian civil war that has killed hundreds of thousands of people. Instead, today they are rebuilding their lives in peace in Suffolk.

Abed and G are both from farming families in the Homs region of Syria. They married in 1999 and today have three children, aged 18, 15 and 10. Before the war started in 2011, they had 10 hectares of land, where they grew tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, aubergines, beans, apples, pears and tout shami (a type of mulberry, meaning literally 'Syria berry')

Each week they would drive the 60 miles from their village to Damascus (in one of the two minibuses they owned) to sell their produce in the capital, returning to the village at weekends. They were not involved politically – Abed describes their life as “just home, work, work, home”.

***“Abed looked round, straight into the eyes of a sniper...The shot passed through his left hand...and into his right arm”***

When peaceful, pro-democracy protests in 2011 were met with lethal force, and violence in Syria began to escalate, at first the family was unaffected. But by 2012 the conflict had spread to the suburbs of Damascus, and suddenly they found themselves in a deadly situation.

As fighting intensified, the family packed their belongings to head back to the village where things would be safer. On a hot July day they were in their minibus on the main road out of Damascus, with Abed driving, a friend in the seat next to him, and G and the children just behind, along with a niece and another family friend and their children.

Abed will never forget what happened next. There was gunfire all around, and when a rocket-propelled grenade flew across the street in front of them, the friend said, “Let's go, they're going to kill us”. Abed looked round, straight into the eyes of a sniper about 25 metres away. In that moment, he knew they were going to be fired at, in spite of the fact there were children in the vehicle.

The shot passed through Abed's left hand, which was on the steering wheel, and into his right forearm. His friend was leaning back and the bullet missed him by centimetres. The friend offered to drive but Abed knew it was not safe to stop, and drove on. Behind him, G and the other adults pushed the children under the seats for safety. Among their possessions in the bus were three gas canisters, which could easily have exploded if hit.

After about five minutes Abed says he “started to see four of each car” because he was so dizzy with blood loss. G took off her headscarf and tied it round his arm while the friend took over the driving. When they reached hospital, there was so much blood that staff had to tear off Abed’s clothes to see if there were other injuries.

At this point, Abed felt no pain and was simply glad he was alive and his family safe. Today, he laughs as he remembers how he asked for a cigarette and was allowed to smoke while the nurses pulled his skin together over the wound so he could be stitched. Later he would have an anaesthetic and three layers of stitches in total.

When Abed had recovered from his injuries, the family returned to the village, but a few months later the war followed them. Unable to continue his business, Abed went to Lebanon for work. When she heard aeroplanes overhead and shelling started in the village, G took the children to a house with a basement to hide, along with 200 other people.



They spent three days in the basement, during which time G had to go above ground and brave the fighting to find food. As well as shells falling, she could hear snipers on nearby buildings, but forced herself to walk slowly and resist the temptation to run in order to avoid making herself a target.

When the shelling finally finished, they emerged from the basement to find the family home half-destroyed, the doors blown in and the staircase gone. Some of their farm buildings were also destroyed, and today they are not sure if anything remains of the house. But again, G was just happy that they were still alive – many families in the village died during the bombardment.

With no home or business, the rest of the family moved to Lebanon to join Abed, who was working as a gardener. They remember staying in a basement when they first arrived, living on bread and cheese and having to catch cockroaches every evening. The family lived in Lebanon for four years. Initially, they say the Lebanese were good to Syrians, but without any recognised rights the situation became worse with employers taking advantage of Syrian workers and aid intended for refugees being misused.

When the family were first contacted by the UNHCR about resettlement, they were surprised – in fact, Abed thought it was a joke. After some months, they were interviewed and had a medical screening, at which families were given different coloured badges depending on the country they were being resettled to. Abed and G had asked for the UK as their children had been learning English in school.

Twenty days later, in December 2016 they were on a plane to Heathrow. Abed says he didn't believe it was for real until the plane took off, while G had very mixed feelings about leaving as she didn't know if or when she would be able to see her parents and the rest of her family again. Neither of them had heard of Ipswich before.

Abed says that arriving in the UK felt “like being hit on the head” as everything around them was so new, but they were happy to see staff from Suffolk Refugee Support at the airport to greet them. The family thinks that Ipswich is beautiful and are happy here. Coming from a rural area, Abed prefers the quieter pace of life compared to big cities, and appreciates the Suffolk countryside as well.

They are grateful to Suffolk Refugee Support for showing them “how to do almost everything”, but are happy to need less help now. The parents' English is improving, while the two youngest children are doing well in school – both excelling at maths – and the eldest is working. Having helped at a community garden for a while, they are thrilled now to have their own allotment, which they have cleared and planted with beans, spinach, onions, basil and mint, as well as a grapevine and fig tree!



Abed, clearing the family's allotment in Ipswich before planting

Although they have found a place of safety and are looking to the future, Abed and G still feel the pain of loss and separation. Everything they worked for has gone – they have seen photos of the land they used to farm showing that all the trees have died – and like so many Syrians, their extended family is now scattered, with relatives in Germany, Turkey, Lebanon and Syria. Abed has lost four young nephews as well as cousins, neighbours and friends. He says there is “no family who hasn't lost someone” in the conflict.

## Syrian Civil War

- In March 2011, peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations began in the city of Deraa, inspired by the 'Arab Spring' in neighbouring countries
- The government used force to crush the protest, and the country quickly descended into civil war
- There are no exact figures, but it is estimated that more than 600,000 people have been killed or are missing
- More than half the Syrian population was displaced by the war, with 7.2 million people internally displaced and 6.8 million refugees
- Women and children comprise more than two thirds of those displaced
- Turkey is host to 3.2 million Syrian refugees, and an estimated 1.5 million Syrians live in Lebanon, the highest number of refugees per capita in the world
- Around 130 Syrian refugees have been resettled in Suffolk since 2016.

## The 1951 Refugee Convention

- 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 28<sup>th</sup> 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 149 states have signed up to the Convention (or subsequent Protocol). No country has ever withdrawn from it
- 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 their claim has been assessed
- Asylum seekers are not required to claim asylum in the first safe country they reach
- 117.3 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide as of June 2025—forced displacement has nearly doubled in the last decade

## 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



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

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."

"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


- Afghanistan has been in a state of armed conflict for more than 40 years, creating one of the largest and most protracted refugee situations in the world, and making it one of the world’s least developed countries
- The first wave of Afghan refugees occurred after Soviet troops entered the country in 1979. More left in the 1980s to escape the Mujahideen, and numbers increased greatly when the Taliban took power in the 1990s.
- The Taliban are Islamic fundamentalists with a track record of severe human rights abuse, including forced disappearance, torture, extrajudicial killings, and denial of rights for women and LGBT+ communities
- Before the Taliban seized power in 2021, over 6 million Afghans were already displaced from their homes, with the vast majority of refugees living in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran
- By 2022, Afghanistan was experiencing one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises, with half the population suffering from food insecurity and 6 million people on the edge of famine
- Suffolk is taking part in the UK’s resettlement schemes for Afghan refugees, both those who worked with western forces and those who are particularly vulnerable under the Taliban regime. Suffolk Refugee Support delivers integration work with Afghan families arriving across the county.

## Suffolk Refugee Support

In 1999, Suffolk Refugee Support Forum was set up by a group of concerned local people in order to provide advice, advocacy and practical support to the increasing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Suffolk. The number of asylum claims in the UK that year had risen sharply, fuelled by violence and oppression in Kosovo, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Over subsequent years, refugees from Afghanistan, Kurdistan, Iraq, Iran, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Sri Lanka, Eritrea, Syria, Ukraine and many other situations of conflict and human rights abuse around the world, whether passing through Suffolk or settled here, have come to our door for support. Often we have been the first friendly face and listening ear they have found in a long time.

Today, Suffolk Refugee Support has developed with the demand for our services, and we run a wide range of projects including an advice service, International Women's Group, youth work, English classes, employment support, a football group, a sewing group, and specialist resettlement work with Afghan and Ukrainian refugees. In 2025/26 we delivered 13,652 advice contacts (a 41% increase on the previous year), directly supporting 1357 people from 50 countries. We provide long term support, with a focus on independence and self-determination, ensuring that refugees and asylum seekers are able to live integrated and fulfilling lives within their new communities.



Suffolk Refugee Support would like to thank all those  
who contributed their stories.

Text by Martin Simmonds  
Design by Julie Begum & Will Rogers





Suffolk Refugee Support is an independent charity and the only specialist refugee support organisation in Suffolk. We rely on individual giving and fundraising to meet the urgent needs of refugees and asylum seekers. Scan the QR code below to find out how to support our work and make sure Suffolk remains a place of welcome and safety.

38 St Matthew's Street  
Ipswich  
Suffolk  
IP1 3EP  
Phone: 01473 400785

[www.suffolkrefugee.org.uk](http://www.suffolkrefugee.org.uk)



Registered charity 1078794

Supported by:

