

A Tale of Two Refugees

After my father passed away last month, at the age of 88, my mother asked me to help clear out his clothes from their Netanya apartment. I set aside for myself the *tefillin*, which he had brought with him from a displaced persons camp in Europe to Canada, where he settled after World War II.

Then I filled a suitcase with garments he had acquired before immigrating to Israel two years ago: sports jackets, long-sleeved cotton shirts and a selection of ties. Since none of the items fitted me, I planned to hand them over to a charity organization. As I put the suitcase in my car, I pictured Netanya's homeless clad with freshly pressed attire.

However, before doing so I was in a hurry to reach Neve Sha'an, a run-down neighborhood in South Tel Aviv, to meet Ismail Ahmed. I expected to sit with him in a café, but he invited me up to his place around the corner.

"If I didn't manage to do anything other than get people to hear my story, I would die happy," he said, as we climbed up four flights of stairs in a building with cracked plaster walls. Ahmed's wife Halima greeted us at the door with a glass of juice, while young Arabic-speaking children and cousins milled around the apartment shared by about ten people. In what seemed completely out of context in the stark, bare-walled place, two of the girls leaned intently over a panel of shining computers.

Ahmed, 42, has been in Israel for three months now. His family of six and the others in the apartment are all refugees from Darfur. Four years ago they fled to Egypt after the fighting in Darfur spread to their village. In Egypt, they lived in squalid conditions in a refugee camp. Ahmed, a computer engineer, was unable to find work.

He speaks gently, in fluent English, gazing intently as he describes his family's exodus to Israel in meticulous detail. "The going rate is \$1,200 for a family," he says, referring to the deal he made with an Egyptian guide to smuggle them across the Sinai border. "But eventually he agreed to let my three younger children go for free and charge only for my wife, myself and my 15-year-old daughter. So he did it for \$600, which was all I had.

"When we got to the checkpoint at the Suez Canal, the guide did all the talking and nobody asked for our documents. Then he put us on the back of a truck being loaded onto a ferry crossing the canal, and covered us with cardboard cartons. He told the children not to move and to remain quiet. That wasn't very easy..." As Ahmed spoke, there



was a power failure in the building. But he continued speaking in the dim light of a cell phone. "When we were near the Israeli border, the guide dropped us off and told us not to try to cross that night because of the full moon. He said to stay covered with blankets for a few days until the night was darker. But after a six-hour walk to the border and sitting for hours on a cold, windy ridge, we decided we would try our luck because we didn't have any food or warm clothing." Moments after crossing the border they were spotted by an Israeli patrol. Three soldiers pointed their rifles at Ahmed and he raised his arms.

"Were you scared?" I ask.

"No, I felt like dancing with joy." He felt safe, he explained, because during the time he had spent in a refugee camp in Cairo, he had read on the Internet about how Darfur refugees detained at the border in Israel were usually released after a short time. "That's exactly what happened to us," he recounts. "After a few days, they dropped us off in Beersheba." Almost immediately, university student activists took them to join a group of refugees who were demonstrating daily outside the Knesset in Jerusalem, to press the government not to expel refugees from Darfur. Along with about 50 other refugees, they were billeted in the homes of Jerusalem families.

"For 12 days we stayed with a family, in the room of their son who was away in the army," recalls Ahmed.

The students, along with various NGOs, helped Ismail find this rental apartment, as well as a job in a restaurant, in Tel Aviv. His children were placed in a local school. He quit that job so he could take his children to school every morning and found a night job at a Herzliya hotel, but gave that up after several sleepless weeks.

Now he is being trained by a firm company as a sound technician, earning an apprentice's salary of 2,800 shekels (\$700) a month. "The rent here is 2,000 shekels a month so it's obviously not enough. What I hope to do is give computer lessons in the evenings." In the meantime, Ahmed and his family continue to get medical and other assistance from various local organizations, which have taken up the refugee cause.

Eager to be independent, Ahmed has put his training to use. By wiring together three donated non-functioning computers, he managed to make two of them work.

While we talked, Amal, his 15-year-old daughter was learning English on the Internet, while his 4-year-old, Fatima, was playing a computer game.

"When we were in Egypt nobody listened to us, nobody believed our stories about being tortured in Darfur," lamented Ismail, pointing to the bullet wound on Amal's head. "In Egypt, people said that Israel was the devil, but the money given to them [Egyptian officials] by [U.N.] aid agencies never reached the refugees. Only when we got to Israel did people seem interested in knowing what had happened to us. People were touched by what we told them."

He went on to describe the organization of refugees he is trying to establish and the conflicts within the refugee community. "There are people from Eritrea, Ghana and the Ivory Coast who are claiming that they are from Darfur. Even if the Israeli government grants full immigration status to 500 Darfurians as they said they would, we think that there are already at least 600 here, so what happens to the others?"

Ahmed says all this without bitterness, in a calm level-toned way. Then his face gives way to a small smile. "When my cousin arrived here with his family after getting out of detention last week, I was able to take them in and help get them started. I was very proud to be able to do that." Ahmed then shows me his refugee status document, with his photo on it, signed and sealed by the U.N. refugee commissioner in Israel. I was struck by how little refugee papers had changed in 60 years. Ahmed's document was in the exact same format as a certain refugee document that I happen to be closely familiar with, issued in 1947 by the U.N. refugee commissioner in American-occupied Germany.

"Come with me to my car," I said. I've got something for you." As I handed Ahmed the suitcase, I said simply: "My father was a refugee once too." I decided to save the rest of that story for another time.

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