

‘And who is my neighbour?’

By Jordan Hattar

As I sat in the Zaatari Refugee Camp in northern Jordan, I asked one Syrian mother what she wanted to tell the world. She responded by turning to her two daughters aged 11 and 8, ‘those could be your sisters, there are no differences between us.’

This mother reminded me that it is just chance where we are born. John Donne, a 17th century English poet, echoes the same sentiment:

No man is an island entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
....
any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

This woman put a human touch to a refugee crisis which, at the time, seemed overwhelming to me, a 20-year-old California native.

Furthermore, this woman reminded me that in addition to material needs, refugees also need for each and every one of us to change how we view a refugee. From my experiences working with refugee populations and living in South Sudan, I’ve found that one of the best ways to make a difference in the global refugee crisis is to make a difference in the way we think of others. To restrain from categorizing refugees as “the other.” To not build ‘us vs. them’ boxes in our hearts.

Since the Syrian woman humanized the plight of the Syrian people for me, Syria has consumed my life.

As a 26-year-old humanitarian and Director of Help4Refugees.org, I’ve spent much of the last year [speaking in schools](#) around the world in effort to put a human touch to the world’s refugee crisis. After 180 presentations in more than 34 countries, several students have reached out. One student named Juliet, an 18-year-old student at Westminster School in London, asked to interview me for a project she was working on. Here is the article she subsequently wrote about the similarities between her grandmother’s experience, as a Jewish girl fleeing Nazi-persecution in Europe, and the contemporary plight of a Syrian refugee.

Please read her article below:

Seeking Common Ground

A man, strolling through Copenhagen, Denmark, asks a young woman for directions. She gives him the information he needs and, in thanking her, he asks her name. When she tells it to him, he recognises it as Arabic. Intrigued, he asks, “Where are you from?” She replies, “Syria.” And then she adds, “But don’t worry-don’t be afraid of me, I’m not a Syrian refugee.”

The man who told me that anecdote is Jordan Hattar, founder of the charity Help4Refugees, and to him it epitomises all that is wrong in the way we view refugees. Why would that woman assume that he would “worry” about her being Syrian? Why would a refugee make him “afraid”?

The question seems an easy one to answer. In the UK and elsewhere, “refugees” are associated with “migrants”, and “migrants” with a constant onslaught of negative publicity. Cameron has called them a “swarm”, The Sun has proclaimed “Illegals have landed”, the Daily Express has warned of a “New asylum surge on way”, even the broadsheets speak routinely of a “refugee crisis”. If it was really the press that dictated attitudes, though, they would surely have changed by now. It has been over two years since Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old boy washed up, drowned, on a Turkish beach, gave the “crisis” a human face. Since then, talk of a refugee threat has increasingly turned to the threatened refugee. The New Statesman has praised the media for moving “from cockroaches to campaigns”. But how often do we ask refugees themselves whether anything has changed?

When I asked Shaza Turkumani, an 18-year-old Syrian who fled her country for Jordan aged 14, how she thinks the term “refugee” is viewed, she told me, “It’s not a good reputation.”

I asked why, and she thought for a moment before replying, “People look on them as weak. They don’t have a homeland. A homeland gives a person strength. He feels that he belongs somewhere. But when he’s a refugee, that changes. And even if he’s welcome, he feels he’s not. When you’re a refugee, you’re forced to leave country and home. You know you’re not coming back.” Two things strike me about her words. First, that she sees recognising refugees’ vulnerability as part of the problem, not the solution. And second, that her words could apply to refugees anywhere. In any time. In any place. So I ask her whether she thinks that comparisons can be drawn between refugees’ experiences across time periods, and across geographical distance. She seems surprised that I even need to ask the question: “Of course. I feel that we [myself and other refugees] are living the same situation, having the same problems. I feel that I understand them and they understand me.”

I am, I should admit, drawing a comparison even as she speaks to me. My Grandmother, Mariette Demuth née Bonda, was one of the millions of Jewish people who fled

persecution in Nazi-occupied Europe. In January 1940, aged five, she fled with her family from occupied Prague to Genoa, Italy. From there, they travelled first to Paris, and then, after Paris too was occupied, to Saran, Correze. When her father was denounced, she and her brother were sent to a Jewish children's home in Chabanne and then to Grenoble, where a Protestant Priest helped conceal the whole family from the Nazi authorities. After the war, they uprooted again, this time to Britain, when my Grandmother was 13.

When I asked her about her experiences, she stressed the difficulties of integrating into a new country, especially at this older age: "When I came to England it was infinitely harder. I was given no help whatsoever. And I had to assimilate into the school. First it was a Welsh-speaking school and it was impossible, so I was removed after about a term. And then we went back to France where I felt very much at home, and then I came back again and was sent to boarding school, and I felt very much a foreigner...I was thrown into the deep end and I really found it very difficult...if I had been welcomed...it would have helped [me] to integrate".

The temptation to make comparisons with Shaza's story is overwhelming. Though, moving from one Arabic country to another, she did not face the same language barrier, she too speaks of not feeling welcome when, aged just a year older than my Grandmother was when she moved to Britain, she started school in Jordan. "The [Jordanian] citizens," she explains, "most of them didn't like for Syrians to be in Jordan. Especially my school mates...it was a very big change for everyone."

When I ask Shaza whether she still feels Syrian, her answer again reminds me of my Grandmother's story. "I still feel I'm Syrian," she replies, without hesitation. "And I'm very proud of that." For my Grandmother, it was the country she moved to aged five that felt like home, and not the one she reached aged 13: "When we got to France I very quickly felt I was French...and then when I came to England it was infinitely harder...I can't say I was settled in any way."

Noticing these similarities between her experience and Shaza's, I ask my Grandmother whether what happened to her 70 years ago influences her views of the "refugee crisis" today. Her answer surprises me. "No," she says. "We left Prague because of the Nazi persecution. Syrians, it's a different story altogether...So you can't put them into one pot. Everybody has a different story to tell." And suddenly, I am ashamed. I fear that I have done exactly what I set out not to do: I have lumped all refugees together, viewing them as a homogenous group, assuming that there was some commonality between their experiences. What right have I, living without fear of persecution in the country I was born in, to presume to comment on or compare the experiences of people who, in time periods 70 years apart, were forced to flee from one country to another? As the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, I have been brought up to be wary of

comparisons between modern-day, racist dictators and Hitler. How hypocritical, then, to compare Syrian refugees to Holocaust survivors.

Yet somehow, stubbornly, something in my mind cannot quite let go of the idea that there's a comparison to be made here. I think back to the words of Jordan Hattar, founder of Help4Refugees. "I think it's actually really helpful and important to compare what the refugees were going through [during the Second World War] with what they're going through now", he told me. "I think it's important to remember that this can happen anywhere." And, finally, I think I begin to understand.

My Grandmother, when she warned against putting people from different places "in the same pot", was talking about how dangerous it is to compare the causes of persecution, or the facts of refugees' experiences. She was warning against treating every form of persecution as though it were the same, and against comparing Assad to Hitler, or modern-day racism to 1930s anti-Semitism. Shaza and Jordan, on the other hand, were talking about recognising shared experiences, in order to recognise our shared humanity. So perhaps comparing the experiences of refugees doesn't have to be about putting them "all in one pot". That is what, I realise now, I was doing *before* I spoke to Shaza, when I knew only that I would be speaking to "a refugee"-one of that nebulous, seemingly homogenous mass of pitiable people that we picture when we hear that word. *After* speaking to her, I saw her not as "a refugee", but as an individual: a girl, my age, hoping to study languages at university. A girl like me, only more eloquent, and with a powerful message. I wonder if this was what Jordan Hattar meant when he talked of recognising that "We could have been born in [refugees'] shoes, and they could have been born in our shoes and it's just chance really where we're born". If it is, and if drawing comparisons between the experiences of refugees at different times, and in different periods, helps us to recognise this shared humanity, then surely it can only do good?

The experiences of a contemporary refugee and Juliet's grandmother are quite different and so is the cause of their fleeing. However, feeling compassion for those who are fleeing, wherever they may be, starts with seeing a piece of ourselves and our family in their struggle. As Juliet said after her conversation with Shaza, "I saw her not as "a refugee," but a girl my age."

Once we feel compassion, the question that often follows next, "What can I do to help?" When my Syrian friends and I aren't talking about serious topics, which is actually more often than one might think, I often ask, "so what do you think the average person can do to help refugees?" I have found recent answers to be worth sharing:

"When you hear someone speaking a different language at the grocery store or on the train, reply with a friendly smile or greeting. Show that they are welcome in your community."

“If it happens to be a Muslim or Jewish holiday, and you know the stranger is Muslim or Jewish, say happy holidays to him or her.”

These responses also remind me of Mrs. Obama’s final message from President Obama’s White House on January 6th, 2017. “Diversity makes us stronger, it’s doesn’t take away from who we are.”

My last day interning with Mrs. Obama in the White House, I remember running my hands over the Great Seal of the United States which included the U.S. motto. *E pluribus unum*. Out of many, one.

I used to argue that there are no differences between us in this world, that we are all the same. But, a friend in Greece reminded me, we do have differences. Differences in the way we look, differences in the languages we speak, sometimes even in the God we pray to. It’s important to acknowledge our differences but we cannot let these differences make a difference.

We cannot let our differences determine how we treat each other.