

An Instance of Direct Refugee Support at Congregation Beth Israel, Portland, Oregon 1979

The March 4, 2022 “Refugee Shabbat” service at Congregation Beth Israel (CBI) featured - in addition to wonderful music and rabbinic comments - a talk by Angela Swan of Portland Refugee Support Group describing the needs of current refugees in Portland and the supportive activities of her organization. Angela was introduced by the Chair of CBI’s Social Action Committee, Sally Rosenfeld; both of them emphasized the need for action at this time, especially for recently-arrived Afghan refugee families.

In talking with them after the service, I mentioned that my wife Judith (z”l) and I had sponsored a Vietnamese refugee family in 1979, and that it was a very positive experience, with continuing friendship today. They both asked me to write a brief summary of our experience, which may encourage others to overcome hesitation about direct involvement. This summary follows ...

... but is too short to adequately contain the joy that has resulted for 43 years, and continues as visits and ever-newer photos of their grandchild continue. The one-sentence summary is that it was a whirlwind of activity, sometimes exhausting, for nearly a year, yet worth every bit of effort in the friendship, learning, and sharing along the way and since. The outline of events sounds bland by comparison to how it felt.

The many refugees created by the Vietnam War (or as they call it, the American War) poured out for several years, typically ending up in squalid refugee camps in Thailand or Malaysia. Refugee acceptance into the USA was metered, then as now; sponsorship was required. Judy and I had spent over ten years “fighting” the War via anti-war marches, vigils, and letters, yet we felt that as Americans we shared responsibility for creating havoc in Vietnam, and needed to take a restorative action. And as Jews, we believe in welcoming the stranger and healing the world . So we sought a course of action, and were made aware of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and its role in refugee resettlement. With a Portland field office at that time, IRC was convenient as well.

I was on CBI’s Social Action Committee at the time, and introduced a proposal that CBI sponsor a Vietnamese family to come to Portland. After much discussion, the Committee declined to recommend that action. If that sounds insular, it’s well to remember that only a few years had passed since the Yom Kippur War in Israel; conditions for Jews in the Soviet bloc were dicey; and a great many Holocaust survivors were still in need. So we understood; but we decided to take on a family on our own. We were 28 years old, with barely any money but plenty of energy. We also had recently adopted our first child, who was one year old. The IRC wisely chose a small family for us to sponsor: a couple who would soon become a triple since the woman was pregnant, and very eager to make it to the US in time for the baby to be born American. This couple had become “Boat People,” hazarding the sea journey out of Vietnam in a small, overloaded boat. The boat had been seized by pirates who stole everything aboard and set them adrift, fortunately rescued later by fishermen. The only thing they had, other than the clothes on their backs, was the man’s college diploma, which he had presciently taped underneath a seat since he was sure that no one would believe any claim he would make in broken English about his education unless he had proof. He had been a college professor.

I picked them up at the airport, took them to our house to meet Judy, and we took them to an apartment nearby we had rented for them. Fortunately, IRC took care of most of the Federal paperwork.

We took them to employment offices, health care appointments, and eventually also to DMV after teaching her to drive and car-shopping used cars. There was food and clothing, furniture and housewares, language interaction and classes - and also walks in parks, an art exhibit, a street fair with music, and discussion time. In a remarkably short time, he had a good job at a tech company; I think it was only 3 months after arrival. And she soon gave birth to their first child, who is indeed American born. After several more months, they moved on their own initiative to an apartment they liked better.

Within no more than a year, they were really independent of us. We have kept in touch and visit the couple and their now-adult daughters. They have been able to visit Vietnam to see family. The daughters are professionals, the whole family has good humor and kind hearts, and I can't think of a better testimonial to the value of immigrants to this country.

But that is not the sole benefit. Not only did Judy and I receive several anonymous, and welcome, gifts from congregants to help in buying supplies in those early months, but also the congregation was inspired to sponsor more refugees. We were so busy with our year that I don't know the exact details, but I believe that four more families were sponsored, each of them bigger than ours. So CBI came through boldly after the initial hesitation. I am pleased that the congregation continues to be active in many ways to repair the world.

Jim Emerson

March 5, 2022