Eight Refugee Stories for Chanukah

Candle-readings for each night from Birmingham Progressive Synagogue

Chanukah is a celebration of freedom from persecution. At the time of Judah Maccabee and his family, Jews were forbidden from practising their religion. Chanukah celebrates their victory over their oppressors and the rededication of the temple in Jerusalem.

In our time, many are still persecuted – for their religion, their political views, their sexuality or other reasons. These stories are about just eight refugees, three Jewish refugees who fled Nazi oppression, and five who sought refuge in the UK more recently. They remind us that as Jewish people, the refugee experience is our experience and that refugees have diverse stories but share a wish to contribute to the country where they find refuge. As we read their stories and light the lights of Chanukah, may we be inspired to support those who seek safety on our shores.

– Rabbi Margaret Jacobi

First Candle: Mohammad and his family from Kabul, Afghanistan

43-year-old Mohammad was a doctor working for the United Nations in Kabul, Afghanistan. His wife worked for women’s organisations. ‘We were happy in our city; everything was normal! We had comfortable and peaceful lives.’

But then in August 2021, the Taliban recaptured Kabul, after the US-led coalition withdrew from Afghanistan. The city was in chaos; schools, universities and workplaces were shut down. Everyone was desperately looking for a way to escape. Mohammad, his wife and their three young children managed to get a visa to Pakistan, and eventually they were able to travel to the UK, as Mohammad had a student visa to continue his studies. They claimed asylum as soon as they arrived.

The beginning was tough, understanding the school system, registering with a GP, transport, communicating. They worry constantly about family members back in Afghanistan, making it difficult to feel settled. On top of that, they do not have the right to work, creating financial difficulties. Mohammad says, ‘The only thing we can do is wait for the Home Office to decide our fates.’

Adapted from Refugee Voices, British Red Cross

Second candle: Nelly Hewspear, from Vienna to Birmingham

Nelly was born in Hungary in 1920 and grew up in Vienna. She was 18 when she fled Nazi-occupied Austria to come to England as a refugee in 1938. ‘I thought of England because I liked sport – I was a sprinter and a skier,’ she said, ‘and England seemed to me to be a country of fairness.’ At first, Nelly worked as a domestic
servant, and managed to find a place for her sister. Her brother survived too, but later they discovered their parents had died at Auschwitz.

Registered as an ‘alien’, Nelly started nursing training in Dec 1939, despite restrictive quotas. But when France capitulated in May 1940, all ‘alien nurses’ were dismissed. Somehow Nelly managed to complete her training. She was nursing at the Maudsley Hospital in London when she met her husband-to-be, David, a doctor. They married in 1946, and moved to Gloucester. Nelly worked as a district nurse, riding a bike through the snowy fields, till their first daughter was born in 1948. Later they moved to Wolverhampton. When her children grew older, Nelly retrained and worked for 18 years in cytology, examining cells through a microscope to screen for cancer.

Nelly joined Birmingham Liberal Synagogue, as it was then. She welcomed newcomers warmly, remembering those who had helped her as a newly-arrived refugee. She lived till she was 100, a dearly-loved member of the community.

Left: Nelly (left) and her brother and sister 1924. Right: Nelly Hewspear with Rabbi Harry Jacobi, also a refugee

Third Candle: Aderonke Apata, from Nigeria to England

Aderonke Apata aged 55 was formally called to the Bar in October 2022, along with other newly qualified barristers. Apata had a degree in microbiology, but fled Nigeria as she had been persecuted as a lesbian. She was detained in Yarlswod immigration detention centre for over a year and spent time in solitary confinement. During her time at Yarlswod, Apata helped to explain to the other women what Home Office immigration refusal letters meant and what was happening in their legal cases. Apata explained the difficult and technical language to them and learned a lot of immigration law from this.

The Home Office rejected her asylum claim and she fought her own case against removal. Whilst she was being physically removed to a flight bound for Nigeria in 2013, fellow detainees were frantically faxing documents in support of her case to the charity Medical Justice. She was not put on the plane. She continued to represent herself for some time, but later secured legal representation and won refugee status in 2017. She intends to specialise in human rights work. She states, ‘Helping others gave me the energy to carry on myself. When you are faced with a life or death situation that’s where the inner part of yourself comes out’.

Adapted from The Guardian 22/10/2022
Fourth candle: Edgar Neuberg, from Kindertransport to metal spinning

14-year-old Edgar Markus Neuberg (later father of BPS Chair Clive Neuberg) arrived with his younger sister on 28th July 1939 on the Kindertransport. Their mother had said goodbye to them as they boarded the train at Stuttgart three days earlier, fleeing Nazi persecution in Germany. The rest of the family did not survive.

Edgar and his sister were taken in by a Methodist minister and his wife in Stockport. Edgar trained at the local engineering college, living for a couple of years in a hostel, where he met other Jewish young people. Edgar settled in the Midlands where in the late 1950s he established Neuberg Metals, a metal spinning business in Digbeth. At first Neuberg Metals made pots and pans, and later shifted into lighting fittings. It was a successful venture, at its height in the late 1960s and 70s, employing 70-80 people. Neuberg Metals, which Clive and his son Elliott still run in Digbeth, made the 15,000 silver discs cladding the Selfridges Building.

Fifth Candle: Mada, from Syria to Scotland

Mada and her children fled Syria for Egypt in 2012 as civil war raged. Her husband could no longer support them and they feared for their children. Mada’s husband then made the treacherous journey to the UK on his own. Whilst alone in Egypt, Mada and her children were victimised as unwanted immigrants. Their possessions were stolen and there was a kidnap attempt on her son. Despite working at two jobs, Mada could not afford to send her children to school.

Eventually, via the British Red Cross, a refugee family reunion application was accepted, but the passports arrived too late and a fresh application had to be made all over again. Three years later, they arrived in Scotland. Mada attended the Family Reunion Integration Project in Glasgow. There she learned English and made friends. She has now trained to be a Red Cross Voices Ambassador, speaking at conferences and engaging with the media to speak up for others who cannot do so for themselves. She says, ‘a life lived without a voice is like a bird with no wings.’

Adapted from Refugee Voices, British Red Cross

Sixth Candle: Sir Erich Reich, Kindertransport to child refugee rights

Sir Erich Reich, who died in 2022, was only 4 when he was forced to flee the Nazis unaccompanied to England. He later found out his parents were murdered at Auschwitz. Sir Erich was the smallest boy depicted in the famous Kindertransport statue by Frank Meisler at Liverpool Street Station.

At the age of 13 Sir Erich moved to Israel in 1948. He returned to England in 1967 to work for Thompson Holidays and then Thomas Cook. He then founded his own travel company, Classic Tours, organising fund-raising trips.
for charities. In 17 years Classic Tours has enabled more than 42,000 people to raise £60m via overseas trips. He was knighted for his services to charity in 2010.

In his role as chair of AJR’s Kindertransport group Erich galvanised many other ‘Kinder’ and their relatives to advocate for the rights and welcome of child refugees today.


🔍 Seventh Candle: Yonasskindis*, from homelessness to safe haven

Yonasskindis is a 72-year old refugee who came to this country from Eritrea after receiving death threats. He is a former bar owner and accountant who supported his country’s main independence movement. His first appeal for asylum was rejected and he faced homelessness despite his age and suffering from diabetes and high blood pressure. Thanks to the Birch Network in Birmingham, he found a home with hosts Hilary and Jim Parle. They enjoy their time together cooking and making sculptures. They say ‘It’s like having a friend with us. He’s also very keen to help out.’ Yonasskindis is awaiting the result of his appeal.


🔍 Eighth Candle: Razan Alsous, from Pharmacist to Cheese Maker

Back in October 2014, Razan Alsous could not find halloumi cheese in her local grocery store in West Yorkshire. ‘Halloumi is a staple food in Syria, mainly for breakfast with bread and olives,’ Alsous, a 33 year-old refugee from Damascus, told UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency. And suddenly she got an idea. ‘We are in Yorkshire where the milk is wonderful. Why not make halloumi here?’ Today, Alsous heads the Yorkshire Dama Cheese Company, producing halloumi in Yorkshire.

Alsous sought asylum with her husband and three children in the UK at the end of 2012. They had lost their family business in an explosion in Damascus. ‘As soon as my asylum was accepted, I had to do something.’ She started producing halloumi in a small, rented shop in Halifax, West Yorkshire. ‘I had never produced cheese before, I was a pharmacist in Syria,’ Alsous said.

Her business grew steadily. Yorkshire Dama’s Squeaky Cheese has won 17 food awards in under three years. ‘It’s good to be recognised for the hard work I put into this,’ she said. Alsous says support she received in Yorkshire helped her to succeed. The UK has given her a lifeline and a home, and she’s grateful for both. ‘My company’s name includes my homeland – that is Dama, for Damascus – but now this is my home. So when people ask where I am from, I say, “I am from Yorkshire”.’