

# Firsthand accounts of refugee problem

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Although it's been thrust into the national consciousness lately because of the ongoing instability in Syria, the refugee crisis is far from a new problem, according to Mick Hirsch, who worked to help resettle refugees before becoming the Director of Religious Education at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Wellesley.

"In fact, the refugee crisis is not in any way new," he said last week at a panel discussion on the issue held at the Wellesley Free Library. "It has been affecting people for centuries and centuries. Millennia, really."

Hirsch hosted two people affected by the crisis who've since moved to the United States and started life anew.

"My family and I spent about a year and a half in a Thai refugee camp," recalled Pon Nokham, whose family ended up in the camp after fleeing their native Laos in the middle of the night when she was just 10 years old. "Despair was just rampant. As much as we were upset at the way we were being treated, I think the crisis created — amongst ourselves — an atmosphere of 'every man for himself.'"

Nokham recalled having her photo taken at the refugee camp. Now a criminal lawyer in Massachusetts, she refers to it as her "booking photo."

According to Nokham, who resettled in the U.S. in the early 1980s, she has no memory of what caused her parents to uproot their family and start them on the path that ultimately landed them in a church basement in Lowell. She does, however, remember the hunger



Thi Thi Aye and Pon Nokham recounted their individual experiences as refugees who eventually resettled in Massachusetts. WICKED LOCAL PHOTO / JORDAN MAYBLUM

## REFUGEES

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and fear pervasive in daily life in a refugee camp.

"There was this constant vigilance, and I was 10," she said. "I'm convinced that's when I developed insomnia, which actually helped me out in law school."

Hirsch said he could tell that Thi Thi Aye, the other participant in last week's discussion, was a vibrant and passionate person as soon as he saw her exit from her plane in Manchester, New Hampshire.

Aye fled her home country of Burma and resettled in the U.S. after five years in a refugee camp. While in the camp, she said, Aye fought on behalf of women in the camp who were at risk for domestic and sexual violence.

"When we have a woman problem, a domestic problem or a rape problem, they don't accept it because [they're men]," she said, referring to the men overseeing the camp where she lived.

"The gender-based violence and the security within refugee camps is something we -- people who haven't spent time in refugee camps -- don't understand," Hirsch said.

According to Hirsch, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that there are currently 65

## Temple assisting two families

Some fourteen months ago, four members of Temple Beth Elohim began an effort to assist refugees forced from their homes due to the war in Syria. As the U.S. was not admitting refugees at that time, funds were raised to assist a synagogue in Toronto that was resettling five refugee families. The Syrian Refugee Resettlement Team at Temple Beth Elohim has now grown to over 80 members and is preparing to welcome two families into our own communities, with the first expected to arrive in January or February. The Temple is partnering with the Jewish Family Services of Metrowest, which is acting as the local arm of HIAS and resettling 12 to 14 families in the Greater Boston/Metrowest communities with the help of several area synagogues. HIAS (formerly the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) was founded in 1881; is the oldest international migration and resettlement organization in the US; and is one of only nine resettlement organizations designated by the U.S. State Department to undertake this humanitarian work. An extensive two-year vetting process is conducted by U.S. security agencies before any family is approved for resettlement.

The Jewish tradition teaches "Welcome the stranger" and "If we can save one life, we are saving an entire world." The team at Beth Elohim is now raising \$50,000 to assist the two refugee families it will welcome. This will cover rent for one year and other basic living expenses. A generous Temple family has provided a \$25,000 challenge gift that will match dollar-for-dollar any donations received through Nov. 30. Another Temple family has covered the costs of a fundraising concert performed by Noah Aronson and his band, a group that performs throughout the country with many original compositions, to be held at the Temple on Sunday, Dec. 18 at 7 p.m. Donations of any amount, as well as the purchase of concert tickets, can be made at [TBEWellesley.org/SyrianRefugees](http://TBEWellesley.org/SyrianRefugees).

million refugees displaced from their homes for one reason or another. That estimate could be a conservative one, said Hirsch, who has worked for the UNHCR in Cambodia.

Nokham said she understands the challenges surrounding refugee

settlement from both sides.

"It was a very lengthy period of acclimating... There was a lot of stumbling on the way until things got comfortable," she said. "I fully appreciate what is being asked of people to receive immigrants...."