

## Forced Migration, Woodbrooke February 2017

If you call yourself English your own personal history is likely to have been affected by the unending story of migration which peaks irregularly throughout history.

In front of me is a letter in stilted English on cheap flimsy paper, written on a manual typewriter, “... *I am sorry I have not written earlier but I heard now that I will not be allowed a visa to travel to London ... I cannot go back home and the people here hate us ... I have been here for 3 years and do not know any future...* ”

The letter is from a Displaced Persons camp in Bari and dated March 1948. I believe the writer was from an anti-communist guerrilla force hunted out of Yugoslavia by Tito after the collapse of Germany. It was written to my father, who had been the military commander of the DP camp. And long before that my mother's foreign ancestors came to England and dug fenland drains.

This was a big weekend in Woodbrooke, with 90 participants and covering the huge field of migration problems, so I am selecting only a handful: for example our small group re-stated that the sufferings of refugees are universal, probably from the beginning of human history, and are properly viewed as a permanent Quaker concern.

The current issues that rightly concern us all – how to welcome the distressed, how to end the detention of those who are not criminals, especially children, how to ameliorate the brutality of some English legal conventions and how to pull back from the ugliest political attitudes. All these are current concerns in detail, but there is a bigger picture, that there are millions of displaced people in distressing conditions in many countries, in camps, hedges and bombsites and this state will be with us throughout our lifetimes and beyond.

Out of the mass of tips from Friends and from formal presentations relating especially to the Syrian refugee families we are befriending, I resolved:

- To inform myself more fully about the legal status of our befriended families, obtain a copy of Gina Clayton's *Immigration & Asylum Law* (up-to-date editions are expensive).
- To understand exactly the rules concerning permitted paid work for refugees generally and for Syrian families specifically.
- To understand what the families' income and benefits are and for how long. (Some Meetings give regular small allowances to refugees.)
- To consider if it would be helpful to arrange a rota of house visitors ?
- And a weekly drop-in at a convenient place ?
- Are there arabic-speaking students at Essex University who would welcome a small income in exchange for helping with interpreting or teaching English ?

(For information: as part our small credit proposals, we are already trying to work out which local refugees have the self-confidence and skills to work independently and may show up those who are most likely to be open to employment.)

And accidentally I seem to be part of an activist legal group determined to challenge the sections of the asylum acts which suspend habeas corpus, that is, permit the government to detain certain people without being called before a court to justify the detention.

The problems of perhaps the greatest European immigration ever could not fit on one small sheet of paper nor could the input of 90 Friends and a weekend of formal presentations be summarized here. We have peered into a vast turmoil of issues that our grandchildren will be struggling with.

John Lewis, 6<sup>th</sup> February 2017