



The One in Our Path

BARBARA SWANSON

It was a hot summer afternoon during Ramadan when I first met Bea.*

I was with a missions team—a group of young people from Salem Covenant Church in Duluth, Minnesota—and we had just spent an afternoon at the local refugee center where I volunteer in Antwerp, Belgium. That day we played games, did crafts, and shared the story of the Good Samaritan with the children and their families. When we left the center, we prayed that the story would go with us and that God would keep our eyes open to those in need.

We had walked about a mile when we saw a woman wearing a veil coming in our direction. She was carrying two large suitcases, and in the heat of that afternoon she looked weary and confused. As we approached her, I greeted her in Dutch. She replied in English and asked if we knew where the refugee center

was, and if she was close enough to continue walking. She had directions to the center—the very one we had left—but they were written in Dutch, a language she didn't understand. I encouraged her to stay and rest, and asked the group from Duluth to stay with her while I got our car. We were able to drive Bea to the center and get her checked in at the front desk.

As a volunteer at the center, which is run by the government, I am involved in helping children with their homework, holding conversation classes for adults, and accompanying teens who are often in Belgium without their families. During the school year I am involved in a Thursday afternoon women's club with members of my church. Through cooking and other creative activities, we build a bridge of friendship to women and their families. Our motto is "Leave your stress at the door and come in

for the fun." When the women move out of the center, I visit them in their homes and invite them to our home to continue to build the bridge of friendship.

After we dropped Bea off at the center, I lost track of her—I hadn't thought to ask for her phone number. Imagine my pure delight when our Thursday afternoon club started up in the fall, and there was Bea, looking refreshed and relaxed. Arab women don't usually give hugs—the traditional greeting is four kisses back and forth on the cheek. But when Bea saw me, she gave me a huge hug. It actually caught me off guard. And since she's short, and we were in this massive hug, it felt like she was just melting into my arms. I was reminded how lonely so many people in my world are. Bea is a widow, no children, and here in Belgium all on her own. We embraced as though we



were old school girlfriends.

There are many Beas in each of our lives: women wearing veils, washing themselves physically as they prepare to pray, seeking truth, seeking peace. The wave of immigrants and refugees that has hit Europe is full of Beas. Here in Belgium, immigration authorities are processing 1,900 applications for asylum every week, in a small country that only processes 16,000 applications annually. The numbers are staggering, perhaps even overwhelming, and for many people, they create fear.

Often I have to remind myself to get over the numbers—get over my sense of being overwhelmed and afraid—and to remember, it all comes down to the number “one.” We are to respond to the need of the one God has placed in our path (literally, in Bea’s case), and let God take care of the big numbers. He’s really good at that! God cares about the ones he is bringing to Europe. He knows the number of hairs on every one of their heads (Matthew 10:30), and he wipes away every tear they shed (Psalm 56:8).

These words of comfort from the Psalms and Matthew are ones I can share with my Muslim friends. We have shared many tears together as they describe losing everything in their homeland, leaving family and a life that disappeared long ago, crossing the sea in unsafe boats, and then walking hundreds of miles to arrive on our path here in Belgium. I am reminded that God is on the move with his people who are on the move.

Bea eventually got permission to stay in Belgium, and moved into an apartment. I had regular phone contact with her for several

months, and we both kept planning a time when we could see each other again. True to Arabic culture, when I suggested that I come for a visit and asked if I could bring along my friends who were visiting from Germany, Bea said, “Of course, you come, bring your friends!” We hopped on the train and two hours later, there she was, waiting for us at the train station to accompany us on our journey to her home.

Bea was our local tour guide, making sure to point out important sites in the neighborhood (the local mosque, the Catholic church, the shop where she buys her halal meat). We then proceeded to enjoy the best afternoon together, enjoying her Arabic cuisine, drinking a special tea made from dried lemons from her homeland, and listening to her stories about her life before she came to Belgium.

And then I asked: “Bea, what do you know about Jesus?” This was the surprise question for my German friends! “You’re going to talk about Jesus? But, Barb, she’s wearing a veil.” In response Bea’s face lit up as she talked about Jesus being such a kind man who always comes to her in her dreams, dressed in white and radiating light. And here’s the best part: Bea told us, “With Jesus, I am always so happy and at peace.” ■

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My Syrian Neighbors RHONDA EGGING

“We had a beautiful home in downtown Damascus. Our sons went to school around the corner. My husband taught math and I taught English at the university nearby,” Mazeia said as she offered me a small cup of steaming cardamom coffee.

She sipped her coffee and looked out the window of her family’s tiny apartment into the gray skies of southern Sweden.

“One day I returned from work to find our building gone. It was all gone. Bombed. I could not even find a photograph in the rubble.”

“Where were your children?”

“I found them at school. I told Ibrahim we

must leave the city, but he thought things would get better and he didn’t want to lose his job. He stayed.”

“Where did you go?”

“We had a home in a small village where I hoped we could rest, but that home was bombed too. I could not sleep any longer. I took my children and flew to my sister in France.”

Mazeia is one of the lucky ones. She got out of Syria at the beginning of the destruction. Her husband waited another year and joined the many desperate people we see on the nightly news. He walked for seventy-two days across Syria into Turkey, paid for passage in a

rickety boat to Greece, was arrested and then let go before safely making his way to Sweden.

My husband, Kent, served as a Covenant pastor for nearly thirty years and he heard many life stories, but the stories we hear from the refugees coming into Sweden sound more like those told by Holocaust survivors. No one wanted to move. The choice was to leave or be killed.

As refugees arrive in Sweden and apply for asylum, the migration agency places them in camps or small villages like ours in southern Sweden. They are given emergency bedding and one small bag each of supplies. Eventually they receive a stipend and can try to rent a place of their own and buy their own groceries, but their basic needs do not end there.

This is where the church comes in. These folks need more than a warm bed and a roof over their heads. They need to see that all is not lost and that God is alive and working through his people.

Wednesday night the church in our village opens its doors to all comers who need help with Swedish language, culture, clean clothes, and friendship.

One night I sat next to Shashia. Dressed in

tight jeans, leather jacket, sneakers, and lots of eye makeup, she could have been an American teen. I attempted to talk to her in Swedish, but she quickly changed to perfect English.

Shashia and her family, smuggled out of Aleppo a few months earlier, represented the small percentage of Armenian Christians who lived in Syria before the war.

“What do you miss most about Syria?” I asked.

“I miss my friends, but I am happy to be with my family.”

“What do you like about Sweden?”

“I like all of you.”

And we like her and her family. Tears spring to my eyes whenever I consider the awesome privilege I have been given to know Mazeia, Shashia, and all their relatives and compatriots who have become my neighbors and friends.

There has not been such a large migration of people groups since the end of World War II. God is on the move and we join him in his work. ■

Rhonda Egging is a short-term missionary serving in Sweden.

Cross-Cultural Bridges

JOHNNA HAYWARD MUNIZ AND FABIO MUNIZ

As we walked into the church for the first time, everything looked and felt like any other Japanese church. About thirty people sat in four rows of chairs facing the pulpit. Japanese song lyrics were displayed on the screen in front of us, and nearly everyone in the room looked to be of Asian descent—except the three of us and one of the women leading worship. Water for tea was being heated in plastic electric pots near the back. Bags for burnable garbage and plastics were found beneath tables of rice crackers and little pies with chocolate in them. All our senses were telling us this was a mostly homogeneous group of Japanese people doing church in a traditional way.

But we realized the service was far from traditional when the greeting time began. In Japan people rarely touch one another—instead they bow in honor toward each other. That morning in church we were greeted with big hugs. People put their cheeks against ours as we had experienced many times in

countries like Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Belgium, France, but never in Japan. Their words were not *konnichiwa* in Japanese, but *tudo bom?* in Portuguese. We were welcomed warmly, as long-lost friends, and we enjoyed the

rest of the service singing Portuguese and Japanese songs. The sermon was in Portuguese, translated into Japanese by the only woman in the room who did not look Japanese.

Though we were at church in Japan, we had just experienced a Brazilian *nikkei* service. The *nikkei* are Japanese emigrants and their descendants, and the truth is, a lot of Brazilians and Latino *nikkei* are in Japan. Their grandparents and parents are originally from Japan, but they were born in countries like Brazil, Argenti-





na, or Peru and have since moved to Japan. They look Japanese, but they speak Portuguese or Spanish, and inside they feel much more Brazilian or Hispanic than Japanese. They eat *feijoada* and like to salsa dance.

We are an American and a Brazilian, who with our two-year-old daughter moved to Japan last summer to work with cultures within a culture. Every week we meet people from different countries like Egypt, Syria, Korea, Saudi Arabia, China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Italy, and France. We are also meeting Japanese people who have traveled to other countries and are interested in practicing a foreign language and remembering their time overseas.

When visiting with people we ask ourselves many questions. What is it like for them to live in Japan? Are they feeling unheard, unseen, invisible? What are the family dynamics? Which language is spoken at home? Are the children feeling more Japanese, more foreign, or more like third-culture kids? What do they

need from us? A friend? Resources in their own language? Connections with others? Reconciliation with Japanese culture or another culture? A stronger sense of identity?

And so our work begins and continues and begins again, as each person we meet presents a unique situation. Sometimes it is clear what they need—as in the case with Ahmed, whom we met on the train. Ahmed is from Egypt. He survived being shot during the Arab Spring, and he then started a revolutionary political party in Egypt. He needed an English-speaking friend, so now he and Fabio talk about soccer, international relations, and plans for when his wife and kids join him next year.

Etsuko, a Japanese woman who used to be a tour guide to Europe and North America, has two young children. She was longing to speak English with other moms, so we connected her with a group in Yokohama. Chiko is a Brazilian who speaks English but not Japanese, so we connected him with our International Hangout on Thursday nights.

Sometimes all we have to offer is music, which can bring together people who seem to have nothing in common. We put on mini-concerts throughout the region. Other times, the needs go much deeper and only a longer friendship will reveal a person's heart and how we can encourage them in personal ways.

Last December, we joined a group

from three different churches—Japanese, Brazilian, and Latino—to go to one of the cities hit by the 2011 tsunami. We visited a temporary housing area where hundreds of people are still living. We held a Christmas service and served a turkey dinner at a community center there. We were moved by the group's strength, their smiles, and their generosity as a couple of women showered our young daughter with homemade jewelry and toys. Most of all, we were incredibly encouraged to be part of three churches of very different cultures working together to show tsunami survivors that they are not forgotten.

Bunka means culture and *kakehashi* is a bridge. We like to say we want to be *bunka no kakehashi*, cultural bridges, bringing people together. In today's globalized society, amid the polarization of politics and fear, it is especially important to connect with people from different backgrounds. As we continue to find words to describe what God is doing in Japan, we are filled with gratitude that so many Covenant churches, as well as many friends and family, are making it possible for us to be here.

■
Johanna Hayward Muniz and Fabio Muniz are short-term missionaries serving in Japan.

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