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Nonfiction



From War To America

The amazing true story of two brothers,
the war in Syria, and life as refugees
in the United States

By **Kristin Lewis**



Francois Jacob (left)
and his brother, Cedric



ZEIN AL-RIFAI/AFP/Getty Images (fire); Shutterstock.com (Statue of Liberty); ©Tim Soter (Francois & Cedric)

Wake up! Wake up!” Fifteen-year-old Francois Jacob was jolted awake by his mother’s urgent voice. It was a hot September night in 2012, and a war plane had just dropped a bomb near their home in Aleppo, Syria.

The sound of gunfire echoed through the apartment where Francois lived with his parents and younger brother, Cedric. A fierce battle was raging in the streets below. And now they were trapped.

Hours passed. Darkness gave way to early morning light. Still, the battle showed no signs of ending. By 2 p.m., it had become clear that the family needed to leave.

They headed down to the street, which was pocked with bullet holes—only to find that their escape route would put them in full view of armed fighters.

“We didn’t have time to think,” Francois says. “We just ran.”

Civil War

Syria has been **embroiled** in a civil war since 2011. It began when protests against the government and President Bashar al-Assad turned violent. Four major groups, each divided into several **factions**, are now fighting for control. Some groups want a different government. Others, like Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), are terrorist organizations.

As the civil war raged on, Francois and Cedric watched the city they loved reduced to rubble. Their neighborhood—where kids had once played soccer after school, and shops and restaurants had always been abuzz with activity—became littered with bullet casings and broken glass. Many of Aleppo’s factories and shops were destroyed, and entire streets were wiped off the map. One explosion shattered the window of Francois’s father’s barbershop.

For the Jacob family—and the millions of other residents of Aleppo—the sounds of gunfire and explosions became routine. Francois remembers one morning in 9th-grade math, hearing a sound like a hand slapping a metal table. The boys and girls in

Cedric (left) and Francois as kids



his class knew it was an explosion somewhere close.

“Everybody either tried to make jokes to calm the situation or they cried,” he remembers. “The teacher said, ‘OK, OK, everybody sit down. Let’s finish this last math problem, and then we’ll go home.’”

Eventually, classes at Francois’s high school were moved into the basement of a church to protect students from stray bullets. Classes that weren’t necessary for graduation—such as gym, art, and music—were cut. There were many days when school had to be canceled entirely. Francois worried about how the disruptions in his education would affect his future.

Fear and Chaos

Francois and Cedric struggled to maintain some sense of normalcy, but their country was collapsing into a state of fear and chaos. Life for the Syrian people was becoming increasingly dangerous and difficult.

The war in Syria has created one of the worst **humanitarian** crises in decades. As of today, more than 300,000 people have



In October 2014, airstrikes destroyed Aleppo’s Shahba Mall. Aleppo was Syria’s largest city, known for its beautiful architecture, thriving economy, and rich history. Today, much of the city is in ruins.

died. Six million Syrians have lost their homes, though they remain in the country. Another 5 million have fled, sometimes with little more than what they could carry in their arms. They have streamed into Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. They have piled into leaky boats, attempting to make it across the treacherous Mediterranean Sea to the shores of Greece and Italy. (From 2015 to 2016, at least 8,000 people died attempting this crossing.) And they have camped out along the borders of Austria, Hungary, and Slovenia, hoping desperately to be allowed through.

These men, women, and children are refugees.

Forced to Flee

Refugees are people forced to flee their countries because of war, **persecution**, violence, or natural disasters. They leave because they have no choice: Staying means putting their lives in grave danger.

For as long as there have been countries, there have been refugees. In fact, human history is full of stories of people forced to flee their homes. In the biblical story of the exodus, the Israelites escaped slavery in Egypt, wandering the desert for 40 years. In the 17th century, thousands of Huguenots fled persecution in France so they could practice their Protestant faith freely elsewhere. In the mid-19th century, a potato

famine in Ireland put nearly 4 million people at risk of starvation, and an estimated 2 million of them fled the country. After World War II, there were some 40 million refugees in Europe.

Today, there are 21 million refugees across the world, according to the United Nations. That’s more than the population of Florida.

And soon, Francois and Cedric would be among them.

Just in Time

On that September day in 2012 when the fighting reached their front door, the Jacob

family understood that their lives were in danger. They needed to get out—immediately. After leaving their apartment, they sprinted down the block. Bullets whizzed around them. They ducked behind a wall to catch their breath.

Then they kept running.

At last, they were able to get to their car and drive to a relative’s house. Francois and Cedric expected to return home after a few days. But they would never see their home again.

After they left, a car bomb exploded near their apartment building, blowing off their front door. In the coming days, more explosions followed. They had gotten out just in time.



Leaving Syria

For the next two years, the family lived in a safer part of Aleppo, but conditions across the city continued to **deteriorate**. Power outages became common. Sometimes when Francois or Cedric turned on the faucet, no water came out. Food, fuel, and medicine grew scarce—money even scarcer. The brothers had to learn to do their homework to the sound of gunfire. They spent many afternoons playing video games—a welcome distraction from the horrors beyond.

Then one day, they received a call that would change their lives forever. Their uncle, who lived in Albany, New York, was an American citizen, and he had secured permission for the family to come to the U.S.

“My first reaction was to be happy because Syria was extremely dangerous and had the possibility of ISIS coming closer and closer to me,” Cedric says. “I was also happy because I heard I would have more opportunities in America.”

At the time they got the news, the family was visiting a relative in another city. Francois’s dad made a quick trip back to Aleppo to make preparations for their journey, but it was too dangerous for his sons to accompany him.

“I never had a chance to go back and say goodbye to my friends,” Francois says. “I never had a chance to see Aleppo, the city that I’d grown up in, and look at it one last time.”

“I never had a chance to go back and say goodbye to my friends.”

—Francois Jacob

Huge Challenges

Starting over in a new place is always a challenge, whether you’ve moved to a new school, a new state, or a whole new country. It can be especially challenging for refugees. Refugees coming to America may not be fluent in English or know about cultural traditions like Thanksgiving and prom, making them feel like outsiders. Sometimes refugees encounter fear and prejudice that make them feel unwelcome in their new country.

Then there are practical issues: finding jobs, getting driver’s licenses and bank accounts, and learning how to get around in a new place. Even grocery store shopping can be **daunting**, with aisle after aisle of strange foods that are nothing like what they were used to eating back home.

What’s more, many refugees, like Francois and Cedric, have escaped unspeakable horrors. They’ve lost their homes, their countries. They may have lost

friends and family members too. It can take years to heal from the traumas and losses they have survived.

Starting Over

On a late October night in 2014, Francois, Cedric, and their parents stepped off a plane at John F. Kennedy airport in New York City. Their journey from Syria had taken five arduous weeks: five days spent in Lebanon, then a month in Jordan, as paperwork was filed and travel plans were finalized. Finally, there was a 12-hour flight to the U.S.

The brothers were exhausted—but relieved to find their uncle waiting for them.

“My first thought was, ‘This place is cold. Is this real?’” Cedric remembers.

The next day, their uncle took them to the house he’d picked out for them in Nutley, New Jersey.

For Francois and Cedric, starting over hasn’t always been easy. After only five days in the U.S.—and still battling jet lag—they started school. They knew no one. They spoke little English. Still, both brothers say they felt very welcome.

“At lunch, I would sit every day by myself for 45 minutes playing on my phone,” Francois says. “Then one day, someone just said, ‘Hey, you want to come and join us?’”



After that, Francois had friends. Cedric had a similar experience at his middle school.

Looking Forward

It’s been three years since Francois and Cedric came to the U.S. Cedric will soon start 11th grade. Francois is now in college and plans to study architecture or mechanical engineering.

They’ve come a long way, but Francois jokes that his English still needs work. “I’m not gonna lie to you,” he laughs. “My spelling is still horrific.”

This fall, the family is making another move—this time to Saratoga Springs, New York. Francois and Cedric are looking forward to living in a place known

for its green trees and soft breezes. Their dad will open a barbershop there, like the one he owned back in Syria.

Of course, the brothers still think about Syria sometimes, about what they’ve lost and how their lives have changed. They wonder if they will ever return to Syria and if they will ever see the friends and family they left behind. But Francois tries to keep his mind off what his life in Syria would be like if he had stayed—those sorts of thoughts can haunt a person. Besides, Francois has so much more to think about: his studies, his family’s new business, his brother.

“I don’t think about it too much,” says Francois, “what would have been.” ●

Writing Contest

According to the Tennessee Office for Refugees, “it is a badge of strength, courage, and victory” to be called a refugee. Explain how this quote applies to the article. Use text evidence. Send your essay to **From War to America Contest**. Five winners will get *The Only Road* by Alexandra Diaz.

Get this activity online.

How to Help Refugees

1 Be welcoming.

A friendly smile, a warm hello, and an invitation to join you at lunch or in an after-school activity can help a refugee feel less alone. “It can be awkward to interact with people who are different,” says Rachel Peric, deputy director of Welcoming America, an organization that works with communities across the U.S. “But that little bit of courage to take a first step is what we need.”

2 Host a dinner.

Ask your parents if you can host a dinner for a refugee family. Sharing a meal is a wonderful way to get to know someone. “Breaking bread together really unifies people,” says Peric.

3 Support a family.

Find local organizations that work with refugees, such as Welcoming America or your local International Rescue Committee chapter. You can sign up to help in a variety of ways, such as greeting a family at the airport, donating clothes, or helping someone practice English.