

NEW NEW ZEALANDERS

by Adrienne Jansen

Most days, Christian Kaka walks to school with his little sister, Georgette. It's just a short, ten-minute walk ... no big deal. But two years ago, Christian was living in Damascus, Syria, a country in the grip of war. Life there was so dangerous his family couldn't go anywhere. So for Christian, being able to walk to school in New Zealand *is* a big deal.

A JOURNEY TO FIND SAFETY

The Kaka family are Assyrian. Christian's father, Toma, is a priest. He's from a city in northern Iraq called Nineveh, but Christian was born in Baghdad.

Baghdad was once a safe and beautiful city, but then came many wars: with Iran, with America, with terrorists. By the time Christian was born, Iraq had become very dangerous. "We wanted to stay," says Christian's mother, Kathreen, "because when you leave your country, you become homeless ..." But Christian's parents were afraid. In 2007, they decided to leave and go to Syria. Over a million Iraqis had already fled there.

"In Iraq, we had no freedom," Kathreen says. "It was as though we couldn't breathe. But in Syria, there was freedom for Christians, for Muslims, for everyone. We lived peacefully together." The family settled in Syria's capital city, Damascus. They registered as refugees. That way, the Syrian government couldn't send them back.



ANOTHER WAR

Then in 2011, war began in Syria. Eventually the fighting came to Damascus. Bombs fell near the Kaka family's home. They fell on a coffee shop, a school, a football field. Every day was dangerous. "You might go out to buy bread and not come back," Kathreen says. The children didn't have a normal life. They would hear screams. They would hear explosions and military helicopters. "Don't worry. It's only Esho's motorbike," Kathreen would tell them. She couldn't always protect her children from the war. One day, a car tried to come into their neighbourhood. A helicopter destroyed it. The family could see the whole thing from their balcony.



THE BOTTOM OF THE WORLD

The Kaka family has been in New Zealand for eighteen months. What did they notice on their first day? "The trees," Christian says. "There were no trees in Syria. And I felt safe. I was so happy."

Kathreen also remembers how beautiful everything was. "Iraq once had green countryside, but because of the war, it had become like a desert. And in Baghdad, all we saw were big walls dividing the city. In Syria, everything was dirty and dusty because of the bombs – even the air."

"IN ONE HOUR, YOUR LIFE COULD CHANGE"

Christian was still going to school, but life became more and more difficult. One day, Christian was in his classroom drawing. "A man came in and said 'Run!'" Christian remembers. "So we ran." Things like that happened a lot. "I really hated going outside because there were helicopters and people who searched cars. They were strict and angry. I didn't even want to go out to play with other kids, so I just stayed home."

There was no playing or school. There was nothing for the children to do. The family was frightened about what might happen next. "In one hour, your life could change," Kathreen says. "The terrorists come, and you run and hide."

Finally, in 2015, the family left for Lebanon. It was only an hour's drive, yet once they crossed the border, they felt safe. Still, they could only stay a short time. Toma couldn't work in Lebanon as a priest, and the country was very expensive. Then the church in Lebanon said it could help the family get to New Zealand. "Where was New Zealand?" Christian wanted to know. A search on the Internet gave him the answer: it was a small country at the bottom of the world. He read about its history, and he watched Māori perform the haka – Christian loved the haka!



Life in New Zealand still had difficulties. The biggest challenge was the language. Kathreen spoke a little English, which she had learnt at school, but the rest of the family didn't speak any English at all. How did that make them feel? Kathreen checks her phone. It can translate Arabic to English. "Discontented," she says.

Once the family was settled in Wellington, Christian started school. He was excited and wanted to make friends but found this difficult. There was the problem of language. And all those months alone in Syria with no contact with other children didn't help. "I couldn't understand them, and they couldn't understand me," he says. Sometimes, Christian felt left out.

DAY BY DAY

Every day, Christian learnt one new word. A friend who spoke Arabic translated for him. And his mother gave Christian some good advice. "Give the other children time, and they'll get to know you," she said. Christian's teacher encouraged him to talk about school in Syria, and the principal spent time helping him learn to play with other children again.

In the beginning, loneliness was a problem, not just for Christian but for the whole family. Their relatives are now spread all over the world – in Australia, Canada, Europe, Germany, America, and Iraq.

"As Assyrians, we like to be together," Kathreen says, "especially at Easter and Christmas. It's very important to us. But when families become refugees, they are often split up. The United Nations Refugee Agency sends one brother to Sweden, parents to Chicago, sisters to Germany – and people accept this because they want to survive. But then they are alone in the new country, and it's very hard. Our children don't have any grandparents here. They're in Iraq and Canada, and that's very sad for us."



Now, the family feels more comfortable here. They've all learnt English through classes, a home tutor, the dictionary, and friends. Online translators are also useful. Now Christian can speak three languages – Arabic, Assyrian, and English. When he grows up, he wants to be a software designer.

NO GOING BACK

Christian and his family can't go back to Iraq – not any time soon, at least. Baghdad is now one of the most dangerous cities in the world. Kathreen says, "When we think about this, we feel sad. The Iraq I grew up in doesn't exist now. We hope that Iraq comes back, but we don't think it will. I wonder how people can still be alive there."

Kathreen wants New Zealanders to know what happened to her country. "Some understand, but some don't know anything. We want them to know we are Assyrian Christians. We would never hurt anyone. We want to help build this country."



Assyrian Christians

Assyria was an ancient kingdom that ruled over Mesopotamia (a very old name for most of Iraq and parts of Syria and Turkey). The kingdom's centre was Nineveh, which has history dating back at least eight thousand years. When the kingdom fell in 612 BC, Assyrians fled to different parts of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria. Although the Assyrians don't have their own country, they have a flag and their own language. All Assyrians are Christian. Now, because of war, they are scattered all over the world. There are around three thousand Assyrians in New Zealand, many of them in Wellington.



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