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Colette Hyman: The U.S. needs a more just, humane response to refugee crisis

Like many Winonans, I am appalled and angered by the Trump bans on refugees, but this hits home for me personally.

Around 1906, Sarah Tobias and Abraham Hyman, along with siblings and cousins, left their homes in Minsk and sought refuge in the United States from the violence of anti-Semitic pogroms. Legal refugee legal status did not exist at the time of their arrival in the United States, but they were fleeing conditions of violence and disruption comparable to those that the individuals and families seeking to enter the U.S. today as refugees are experiencing. Like them, my grandparents and great-uncles and great-aunts, were forced to leave their homes in order to survive, and they left homes to which they would never be able to return.

But they were lucky in comparison with Jews seeking to flee anti-Semitic catastrophe 30 years later. By then, “America First” anti-immigrant sentiment in the US had led to the passage of harsh immigration restriction laws in 1921 and 1924, signed by President Warren Harding. When Hitler and the Nazis began their genocidal assault on European Jewry, these laws blocked all but a few Jews from Germany and Eastern Europe from entering the US, and President Franklin Roosevelt’s refusal to make exceptions to these laws meant that boats full of refugees were turned away from U.S. ports and their passengers condemned to gruesome deaths in concentration camps.

Horrifically, it would seem that the Trump administration has learned little from this history. The Trump ban on refugees is condemning people who have already lost everything to civil war, religious intolerance, and ethnic cleansing to continued and untold suffering. And more than half of those seeking refuge from dangerous and deadly conditions in their own countries are under the age of 18.

Many of the refugees seeking entry into the U.S. have already experienced extended stays under the harsh conditions of refugee camps, in Thailand, in Kenya, in Turkey, and in other countries that are providing some respite to people fleeing for their lives. Refugee camps are notoriously overcrowded and lacking in adequate sanitation.

And in these camps, refugees, who most often left their homes with little more than the clothes on their backs, are fully dependent on the work of international organizations such as the United

Nations and the Red Cross, for food, housing, clothing, and medical care. As one refugee who spend time in such a camp recently told me: “You are in their hands; you are an open book.”

It is under these harsh and dehumanizing conditions that so many refugees begin the long process of gaining admission to the United States. Their lives and their relatives’ lives are carefully combed over, for confirmation of the validity of their claims to refuge and their conformity with the high standards of honesty, responsibility, and upstanding character required for acceptance as refugees.

Applicants for refugee status are subjected to multiple rounds of background checks, including fingerprinting and DNA testing, and personal interviews, that last up to two years and that involve the U.S. Departments of State and Homeland Security, as well as the FBI and the CIA. When they are approved for refugee status in the US, there is yet another period of waiting while arrangements are made for their transportation to the US and relocation to a community, where programs like the Winona Diocese Catholic Charities Refugee Resettlement Program will mobilize the resources necessary for these new neighbors to become integrated into their new home communities, to find housing, employment, language instruction, and education for the children.

Except that much of this work has now ceased, because of recent executive orders halting the process of welcoming refugees to this nation. What does this mean for those families? What does it mean for the U.S. and for Winona?

For the refugees, it means an indefinite extension of their stay in refugee camps; it means continued exposure to violence and uncertainty. For our nation and our community, it means the loss of all the contributions that refugees, like all other immigrants, would otherwise be making to our economy, our culture, our understanding of the world. We need to speak up for those who are in dire need of refuge.

We cannot repeat this nation’s deadly inaction with regard to refugees during World War II. Tell Trump the U.S. needs a more just and humane response to the refugee crisis engulfing large swaths of our globe.

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