

Jewish Converts from Islam Take Refuge in Charlotte

By Karen Brodsky

There are a lot of things one can do on the Internet. Converting to Judaism is not one of them.

Growing up in the city of Rasht on the Caspian Sea in Iran, Maryam and Reza led pleasant upper middle class lives. Their Shiite Muslim families are not religious at all. As all Iranian women do, Maryam wore a head scarf, but not like all, she finished high school. Reza studied graphic arts in college but was not able to finish his degree. He did, however,

work as a graphic designer for the city of Rasht.

Maryam and Reza met, fell in love and married in 2001. Tight with another young Iranian man, the three began questioning the Muslim religion and studied the Bible and the Koran. They discovered a New Testament translated into Farsi and were able to get a Tanach in Farsi from friends in Tehran. They often visited a website, "Ask Moses," to learn more about Judaism. Gradually, they discovered they believed in Jewish

values and the Jewish way of life.

Three Shiite Moslems in an Islamist state were risking their lives to study the Tanach.

They went on the Internet often to learn more about Judaism, rotating their visits among several Internet cafes, all of which had security cameras. Over time they struck up friendships on the Web with various rabbis and some Israelis. Reza took the name Gabi, after the famous Israeli general, Gabi Ashkenazy.

Gabi traveled to Istanbul, Turkey, in 2004 to make contact with the Jewish community so they could convert. He visited a synagogue — one that a suicide bomber attempted to destroy a few months earlier. He was met in the courtyard and questioned. He was not allowed in for security reasons. During his three-month stay he attempted to contact other members of the Jewish community with no luck. Facing a lot of fears, Jews in Turkey are suspicious and careful.

Maryam and Gabi got bad advice on the Internet: Go to Azerbaijan, where they would be able to convert. Part of the former Soviet Union, Azerbaijan, they heard, was a safe haven for people escaping Iran. Not so. The three first visited the Israeli embassy in Baku, where they did not receive a warm reception. Days earlier, Iran security forces had been seen filming the embassy and the Israelis were also suspicious of everyone. They were unable to get a visa to travel back to Iran.

They returned to Turkey and



Sarah Ferrin welcomes Maryam and Gabi to Charlotte in their new apartment.

applied for refugee status from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In the meantime they had a cadre of people they met on the Internet rooting for them to be able to convert, but none could help. One rabbi assured them that refugee status would allow them to enter a country where there was religious freedom so they could convert.

Having received refugee status, Maryam and Gabi waited to hear when they could leave Turkey. HIAS in New York assigned the young couple to be resettled by Carolina Refugee Resettlement Agency (CRRA) in Charlotte.

About ten months ago, they were greeted at the Charlotte airport by two members of the CRRA staff, Jewish Federation staffer Sarah (Kaplan) Ferrin, director of community relations and Israel affairs and her then fiancé, Robert. CRRA took them to their furnished rental apartment

in East Charlotte, where they enjoyed traditional Persian food, flowers, plants and modern housewares provided by Jewish community members, Adriana Epstein and Amy Gould to augment what they already received by CRRA.

CRRA provided them services, taking them to Social Security, the Department of Social Services for food stamps, to the Health Department and to shop for groceries. The agency also paid their rent and electric for the proscribed amount of time.

Maryam and Gabi met the associate rabbi at Temple Israel, Faith Cantor, who invited them to join her conversion class. They attended for a time until Gabi got a job that requires him to work on Tuesday evenings. Until he finds a new job, the Tuesday evening class is elusive. CRRA is working to find Maryam a job, and she is studying English at CPCC.

Gabi and Maryam want to close the circle and convert formally. Maryam wears a Star of David around her neck; they are both Jewish in their hearts.

CRRA, an affiliate of HIAS Inc., settles refugees from many countries and relies on volunteers, in-kind donations and cash to provide its services. In addition, CRRA enjoys help from volunteers. For more information, to volunteer or donate, visit the CRRA website at www.carolinarefugee.org. ☆

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Butterfly Garden Dedication to Take Place at Annual Yom HaShoah Observance

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In San Diego, the butterflies are displayed on an outdoor wall of the Jewish Academy building. Here in Charlotte, we needed a different mode of display, as the outdoor walls of our Levine JCC are brick. Enter now local artist Paul Rousso.

Paul's father's family from Rhodes all perished in the Holocaust. And he is well known in the community for creating art that dazzles and amazes. His butterfly sculpture that now stands in Shalom Park just outside the entrance to the Levine-Sklut Judaic Library and Resource Center is a testament to the enormity of the project. And the sculpture will be surrounded by living plants and flowers, creating a unique garden site for the memorial butterflies.

"... It went away I'm sure Because it wished To kiss the world good-bye. ..."

And of the ceramic butterflies themselves? The commitment of 2,000 butterflies has been exceeded. There are now over 2,600 butterflies and more continue to be made. As more are created, they will be added to the sculpture, making it "a living, growing memorial," in the words of Judy



Artist's rendering of the Butterfly Garden and Sculpture.

August, yet another volunteer who has given so much time to this project.

The weekend will kick off early, on Thursday, April 28 with a teacher workshop. The unveiling of the sculpture garden with its first application of ceramic butterflies will be Sunday, May 1 at 1:30 PM. A ceremony and program with several components is planned. The day will include the community's annual Yom HaShoah service with survivors' candle-lighting, the dedication of the garden, and a 60-minute production written by our local teenagers, which includes song and dance. There will be child-age

appropriate activities and some of the originators of the project from San Diego will be on hand as well.

"... For seven weeks I've lived in here, Pinned up inside this ghetto. But I have found what I love here. ..."

In order to keep this memorial "living" and "growing," and in order to continue to bring the workshops to the local schools, an Endowment Fund is being set up exclusively for the Butterfly

Project. If you would like to make a donation, please go to www.charlottejcc.org and click on the Butterfly Project button on the left. There is information about donating there.

Please look for more information on the Yom HaShoah Dedication Ceremony in the May 2011 edition of The Charlotte Jewish News.

"... The dandelions call to me And the white chestnut branches in the court.

Only I never saw another butterfly. That butterfly was the last one. Butterflies don't live here, in the ghetto."