

## **Iranian Religious Minorities in Vienna**

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### **Overview**

The Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) in Vienna, administered by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), is the processing site for Iranian religious minority refugees on their way to resettlement in the USA. Applicants—Armenian and Assyrian Christians, Baha'is, Jews, Mandeans and Zoroastrians—begin the process while still living in Iran, then leave everything behind and come to Vienna to begin the next, intensive phase of their journey. Life in Iran may still be foremost in their minds while they are in this old European capitol, which can be particularly disorienting. Their stay in Vienna may last five months or more. During this time, OPE Vienna applicants take a sixteen-hour Cultural Orientation class. OPE Vienna has been conducting CO courses since July 2001, and has kept pace with the dramatically increased number of refugees admitted to the program. Between October 1, 2007, and mid-July 2008, OPE Vienna has delivered CO training to 2,372 students and expects to graduate another 750-800 students from the program by the end of this fiscal year.

### **The Population**

The majority of applicants are Armenian or Assyrian Christians from Tehran, but a smaller percentage are of other faiths, and come from cities such as Isfahan, Shiraz and Ahvaz. Ninety to ninety-five percent of the applicants speak, write or understand Farsi—consequently, OPE Vienna CO classes are conducted by English-speaking instructors using Farsi language interpreters.

The students in the OPE Vienna CO classroom demonstrate a high average level of education and language skills. The literacy rate in Iran is much higher than that of many neighboring countries. Illiteracy among the younger generations is rare. Consequently, almost thirty percent of the caseload have Bachelor's Degrees or equivalent educations. Some applicants have less formal educations or no diplomas—for example, Baha'i often attend “underground” universities. Women in Iran often attend university, and among the applicants, females have often attained a higher level of formal education than their male counterparts.

The men in the caseload have been employed in Iran in a variety of professions, as metal workers, interior designers, engineers and taxi drivers. Many of the women have worked as homemakers, but also as receptionists, accountants, teachers and fitness trainers.

About twenty-five percent of applicants have pre-existing medical conditions such as hypertension, and thyroid problems. Many elderly applicants have heart disease, and about five percent of the adult applicants have diabetes.

This refugee group does not include a lot of cases with a “typical” American nuclear family structure of mother, father and young children. Instead, the caseload includes many older parents with children in their late teens or twenties. The average case size is 1.9. Most cases are couples or single people. A much smaller number of the cases consist of small or extended families.

### **CO classes and curriculum**

The Cultural Orientation course at OPE Vienna consists of 4 four-hour class sessions, which generally take place Tuesdays through Fridays. During a typical week, three CO teachers will be leading three separate classes, which each contain twenty-five students. Consequently, on average, 75 students complete the CO course each week.

The Vienna CO course focuses on topics relevant to the refugee’s resettlement in the USA, including Employment, the Role of the Resettlement Agency, Housing and Health. Each unit of the course is built around a series of key teaching points, and taught through a mix of lectures, group activities, role-playing exercises and guided class discussion. Instructors distribute the Welcome to the US Guide (Farsi language version), show sections of the corresponding DVD produced by the Center for Applied Linguistics, and use other visual materials, including posters and hand-outs.

Over the last year, the OPE Vienna CO staff have phased out a purely lecture-based format and introduced a much more interactive, lively approach to the course. Students have responded enthusiastically; they tend to enjoy the class more; and based on in-class feedback and written course evaluations, they are leaving classes with more realistic expectations of their resettlement in the US. OPE Vienna now looks forward to developing a more extensive Family unit in its CO course, which will include a sharper focus on the needs of applicants who have older children or elderly parents, as well as those who plan to live in an extended family situation in the US. Many of the applicants at the Vienna OPE fit this profile, yet are only casually acquainted with American notions of family values, conflict resolution and respect for the elderly.

While in class, students often express concern about assimilation and adaption to American life. During one role-playing exercise, the question of how refugees may (or may not) maintain their ties to Iran almost always generates a heated discussion. The students ask many questions during the sections of CO class devoted to jobs, money management and health. They are particularly interested in US recertification and licensing requirements for the professions which they practiced in Iran. In the Education unit of the course, CO trainers place a strong emphasis on community college, trade school and ESL courses for applicants.

In general, the Iranian students in the CO course are inquisitive, motivated and reflective. They take CO seriously, but also enjoy playing with new ideas and information.

### **Living Conditions in Vienna**

The challenges facing applicants while they are in Vienna are less harsh and more subtle than those facing other refugee populations elsewhere. Housing, groceries and everyday necessities are expensive; the more formal Viennese culture and manners can be inscrutable and off-putting for Iranians, who are used to a warmer, more demonstrative exchange between friends and strangers; and because of visa restrictions, the refugees may not go to school nor work while they are in Vienna.

Some applicants complain of feeling lost here; many of them arrive expecting to be in Vienna for no more than two or three months, but the typical stay is five or more months. One student explained that in Iran, he was always busy—he worked, volunteered and was also a member of a community social club. But in Vienna, as he waited to be approved by DHS for travel to the US, he did not know what to do with himself.

While in Vienna, the applicants often live in the 10<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> districts of the city, which are already neighborhoods with large immigrant and refugee populations.

Few of the applicants speak German, but those who speak at least a little English tend to have an easier time in Vienna.

While in Vienna, Jewish applicants get a good deal of assistance from the local Jewish community. Some Zoroastrian applicants meet local members of their faith and get help from Zoroastrian websites devoted to life in Vienna and in-transit. Members of other faiths attend church here or have some other form of informal contact with the local community.

### **Considerations for Domestic Resettlement Agencies**

Typically, 80 to 85 percent of any one CO class is planning on resettling in California, with many applicants going to Glendale. About 50 to 60 percent of applicants are leaving behind close family in Iran, while almost all of them are meeting an anchor/relative in the US who has “sponsored” them. Reuniting with their families is a very positive, even profound experience for refugees. However, they must sometimes learn to beware of misinformation their friends and relatives may give them about resettling in the US.

The refugees in the OPE Vienna program are generally eager to work hard. Before taking the CO class, however, applicants have a lot of uncertainty about life in the US. For example, they may not know when they can start working or get a Social Security card in the US. Some have heard there are no jobs for them in Glendale, and don’t know they may be able to find work in a neighboring section of Los Angeles.

A large number of applicants are between 50 and 65 years of age. These refugees may consider themselves too old to work in the USA, but they are also too young to be eligible for government benefits like SSI or healthcare programs like Medicare. Many Iranian refugees do not understand that someone who is 60 years old and has high blood pressure will likely be considered employable in the US. Also, many applicants in this age group owned their own businesses in Iran, and expected to stop working by age 50 or 55 because their children would be taking over the family business for them. They may expect this to be their future in America as well, without understanding the differing economic realities, business environments and government benefits programs in the USA.

In Iran, domestic violence happens behind closed doors, sometimes in a “silent” way, and men are often not arrested or prosecuted for abusing their wives. As a result, refugees in this program certainly know about the crime, but do not have experience with a legal system which punishes those who commit it. This may lead to a cultural disconnect, and for some, trouble with the law, both in Vienna and the US.

Applicants often want (or expect) to go to college or university when they get to the US, and believe that four-year bachelor degree programs are affordable and accessible (i.e. not particularly competitive) in America. CO trainers at OPE Vienna attempt to adjust these expectations.

Iranians often have a “book” knowledge of English, but little living language experience. They may overestimate their own English language skills. Some believe themselves to be advanced English speakers because they have studied the language for ten years, but once in America, they find that they only have an intermediate or even beginning knowledge of the language.

After the Revolution in Iran in the late seventies, Islamic authorities stripped government offices and organizations of Western-educated workers, and replaced them with people who were in some cases completely unqualified for those positions. Because of these historic upheavals in Iran, Iranians coming to America may bring with them incorrect assumptions about bureaucracy and government workers in the US, and may regard government workers and organizations with caution or suspicion. During their resettlement, they may experience trouble because of this history.