

Vanig Garabedian, 47, was on board the first government-organized flight of Syrian refugees to Canada on Dec. 10. He came with his wife Anjilik Jaghlassian and their daughters Sylvie and Lucie, 12, and Anna-Maria, 10. The very first people to leave the plane, the family's arrival in Toronto was widely photographed, as was their meeting with the prime minister. One month later, Garabedian, an obstetrician/gynecologist for 15 years in Aleppo, has settled into an apartment in the suburbs of Toronto. He spoke with Monika Warzecha.

Before war, we had our life, our parties, we had our journeys inside and outside of Syria. People were rich. We were not used to seeing people in the streets, begging.

We were very happy, but everything was different after March 2011. People there don't want the war. But everybody is fighting in Syria. Everybody. They are destroying Aleppo now — the city, the ancient things, the citadel. Imagine four years without electricity.

In Aleppo, we were eating from cans. Imagine four months without any vegetables. There, everybody is afraid of the future, so they have to store for it, for bad days. Two years after the war started, they used all their storage. Afterwards, it was worse.

My own clinic was hit. We used to close the clinic and the lab at 2 p.m. In Syria, there is another system of working. We have a break for two, three hours and afterwards we work once again from 5 to 8 p.m. We like to eat with the children, spend time with them, and after that we come back to work. So for the first time, my wife calls me, asking me to close. It was half past one. I have plenty of patients I need to see. She said, tell them to go and close the clinic. That was her instinct.

I had six employees, we dismissed all of them. At half past one, we closed. At exactly 2 p.m., the rockets came. A man must believe in a woman's instinct, in the war, especially.

When they told me, "Your clinic was hit," three minutes from my home, I was happy because I was away from the clinic with my loved ones.

The last time I was in Aleppo, I saw three buildings destroyed in front of me. One rocket — stone buildings, strong buildings, four-storey buildings.

So at that very moment, I said let's go quickly. I took some of our things. I thought the second rocket would be on our home. We went to our car, it was almost all under the stones. We walked to her parents' house. And afterwards, we went to Beirut.

We were in Lebanon for almost a year. A friend and the Armenian Community Centre sponsored us.

We waited. And everyday the children are asking, "Have they called you?" Everyday: "They call

you or not? Tell somebody to call us!”

That was on the third of July when I heard that the approval came for the (sponsorship). It was very happy. At that moment, we began to prepare. The children were going to school in Lebanon. They were studying English so we pressed them to study more and more.

Before my flight, I was reading so many books and articles. I even observed the elections here. I read about the NDP, and Mulcair and Trudeau and Stephen Harper. The MPs – how many they have in Quebec and British Columbia. I want to be here, like a Canadian.

On Sunday (Dec. 6), the International Organization for Migration told us, “Your plane is on Thursday.” Four days to prepare. It was fighting against time. We were packing very quickly.

The flight takes 13 to 14 hours, with a landing in Germany. We felt relief on the way to Toronto.

Before landing, maybe half an hour, somebody came from the IOM. And they said, “You and your family will be the first to come off the plane.” We didn’t ask why, we thought maybe it was because we were a family.

When we entered the airport, it was a special terminal, no one was there, only staff. We went through the procedures, the paperwork.

Then, I saw Trudeau. I know him — by the papers I was reading for months about him and his party and other parties. So I know him very well.

The prime minister was searching for coats for my children. First guy we’re going to meet is the head of the country! We are not familiar with such things in the Middle East. Here, the prime minister is the ordinary man. He is a man, you can see him in the streets. It was very good for us to see him like us.

You can see it by the smile of my wife in the photograph. You can see how happy she is. It’s surprising, but at that moment, we forgot the journey, that we are tired

The government prepared to take us to a hotel at 4 a.m. It was good for us – take a bath or relax. Afterwards, at 11 a.m. they take us to ACC and to the church. And everybody, every sponsor took his relative or friend. They spread everywhere.

Since then, the children started school. The teachers say they are understanding everything so we are happy about that. But we work a lot for that, from July to coming here. Maybe next Saturday or after, we are planning to go to the Ontario Science Centre. I have volunteer work and we are taking classes.

Laura Pedersen / National Post

Laura Pedersen / National Post Vanig Garabedian in his home in Toronto.

We came and we are happy about that. I don't want the government to make it so that, "Oh you are a doctor, go work as a doctor." The doctor must first meet the people, to learn how these people think. But how can you lose the experience of delivering 11,000 babies? But I believe someday we'll manage that.

In the end, we can work health-related jobs — there are jobs. This is an open country.

We think Toronto is a good place. Everything is better. From the very beginning, I told my family, we are going to be like the Canadians. I'm not going to bring my life — we are going to be changed. So far, it is as I read. The people are very nice, even nicer than I read about.

We see the whole world here. On the subway, you can see everybody, from every country. It is lovely to be multicultural and one culture. In the end, you are Canadian. We love this country, we love the people, the generosity of them, and we thank them.

Here is my opinion:

I think that Syrian people need help and their not getting it. This war has been going on since 2011 and no one really helped or they didn't realize how it affected them. But we see how lives are bad in Syria and not everyone is as lucky as this family to get away from the war. There are still thousands of people who are in need of help. Canada and the United Nations has helped by donating and taking in refugees but if we don't help more, more people are going to die. Also, In Syria, workplaces, homes, schools and attractions like malls are bombed while there are people in it and it's dangerous for people to even be in their own homes. These people have to have somewhere to live and that's why we should accept them. It was only December 2015 that Canada started taking in refugees and that's bad.