



# 7

## The Story of Jonny, an Eritrean Entrepreneur in Tel Aviv, Israel

Sibylle Heilbrunn and Anna Rosenfeld

### 7.1 Introduction

In the Israeli context, the phenomenon of refuge is embedded within the historical context of Jewish and Israeli history. Israel has articulated a moral obligation to provide a place of refuge for survivors of the Jewish Holocaust and for contemporary Jews, and it is in this light that the “basic laws”, which constitute the core of Israeli immigration policy, need to be understood (Yaron et al. 2013). Thus, the “Law of Return” (1950)—directed at Jewish people only—states that every Jew in the world has the right to come to Israel to settle and acquire citizenship, if at least one grandparent is Jewish. At the same time, the “Law of Entry” (1952), directed at non-Jewish people, regulates the right of non-nationals to enter and reside in Israel alongside the adoption of the so-called “Prevention of Infiltration Law” (1954). The latter defines the term

---

S. Heilbrunn (✉)

School of Social Sciences and Humanities, Kinneret College on the Sea of Galilee, Zemach, Sea of Galilee, Israel

e-mail: [sibylleh@kinneret.ac.il](mailto:sibylleh@kinneret.ac.il)

A. Rosenfeld

Department of General History, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel

© The Author(s) 2019

S. Heilbrunn et al. (eds.), *Refugee Entrepreneurship*,  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92534-9\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92534-9_7)

“infiltrator” as people who have “entered Israel knowingly and unlawfully” and who have been “a national or citizen of Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Trans-Jordan, or Yemen”, or who have been a resident, visitor or citizen of Palestine, armed, and who have sought “to cause death or serious injury to a person”. Initially, “infiltrators” were nationals of an enemy country, subject to criminal law, tried by a military tribunal and could be imprisoned upon arrest for five years (Yaron et al. 2013).

Since 2006, the arrival of approximately 60,000 east Africans, mainly from Sudan and Eritrea (Sabar 2010), has caused officials and civil society to revisit the policies and approaches of the state towards non-Jewish arrivals, exposing a hitherto underdeveloped asylum system. Sudanese and Eritreans were given a “Conditional Release Visa”, offering them group protection, meaning they are protected from deportation, but not allowed to work or have access to welfare or medical services (Hotline for Refugees and Migrant Workers 2014). This “temporary prevention of exclusion” (temporary group protection) derives from Israel’s obligation to the UN’s petition regarding the status of refugees. The state of Israel chooses to define “asylum seekers”<sup>1</sup> as “infiltrators”—foreigners who have illegally entered Israel through the Egyptian border and have been captured upon crossing the border or arrested within the borders of Israel. Israel’s policy towards asylum seekers is aimed at deportation rather than integration, including retention along borders, so-called “hot return”, forced geographic allocation and supposed “voluntary” departure, which is, in actuality, coerced (Barak-Bianco and Raijman 2015). Overall, Israel’s policy definitively makes these people illegal.

Eritrea is an east African state with a population of about 6 million. The Eritrean regime is a single-party regime and has been known to be a repressive dictatorship, violating human rights in ways that can be regarded as crimes against humanity. The people of Eritrea are involuntarily and unlimitedly recruited to the army, where they experience torture and slavery-like conditions. There is no political freedom in Eritrea, nor is there freedom of speech, movement, press or religion. These are the main reasons for the mass escape of Eritrean civilians from their homeland. Following the “Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum in the European Union 2014 (EASO 2015), in terms of numbers, Eritreans

composed the third-largest group of asylum seekers in Europe, after Western Balkan State nationals and Syrians.

In western European countries, 84% of Eritrean asylum seekers are recognized as refugees, and social and economic integration is encouraged. Contrastingly, in Israel, legal and political authorities are cooperating to prevent the affordance of refugee status to Eritreans, assuming that this policy will encourage their departure from Israel. Thus, Israel deprives asylum seekers of their potential social and political rights and turns them into a marginalized group with little or no chance to integrate into local society. The people live in a constant state of instability and limbo (Anteby-Yemini 2015).

Against this background, it is even more surprising to observe asylum seekers and refugees in Israel engaged in entrepreneurship. Figure 7.1 shows Jonny, an asylum seeker from Eritrea, who started a kindergarten for children from the Eritrean community, and this chapter presents his story.



Fig. 7.1 Jonny at his kindergarten in South Tel Aviv

## 7.2 Personal History and Reason for Leaving Eritrea to Travel to Israel

Jonny was forcefully recruited to the Eritrean army in 2007. He described his two years of service as extremely tough and dangerous, working in conditions of slavery and rarely getting home visits, while being paid an extremely low wage that would not even cover the purchase of one kilogram of sugar. When asked to recount the moment he understood he had to flee, he answered:

*When my parents and siblings left the village to search for food and I could not help them. I met an old man who had been guarding in the army for years. They literally stole his life. I saw this man and said to myself I have to run away. And I knew that I had to leave the country.*

On the February 5 2009, when standing guard at the Ethiopian border at night, he crossed it and began walking away. In Ethiopia, he arrived at a UN facility where he stayed for 40 days. He then continued his journey on foot at night and crossed the border to Sudan. There, he remained in another UN facility for about four months, until he was kidnapped by Bedouins:

*The three Bedouins took me in a Toyota to the Sudan border, where people who aimed for Israel stayed. We were then taken via the Sahara Desert to Cairo. The Bedouins tried to blackmail families or acquaintances; if you can't raise the money they torture or kill. Eventually I was brought to Sinai and managed to escape with the help of a Bedouin who took me to the border.*

Jonny described the moment he managed to cross over a fence into Israel as unforgettable: Israeli soldiers told him, "Welcome". He was then sent to the Saharonim prison for two and a half months. He described these times as extremely hard, physically and mentally, since he was suffering from the aftermath of his flight, kidnapping and escape. When he was released from prison, Jonny was put on a bus to the Levinsky garden in south Tel Aviv. This journey marks the end of the detention period and the beginning of the period of surviving and flourishing as an asylum seeker in Israel.

### 7.3 Business Data and History of Establishing the Business

Jonny started his new life in Tel Aviv in 2009 and, with the help of other asylum seekers, found a cleaning job within two weeks. As soon as he had made a little extra money, he began transferring small amounts to his family in Eritrea on a regular basis. Rather exceptionally, and early on, Jonny grasped his need to learn the local language and made an effort to learn Hebrew as quickly as possible: *“The asylum seeker community in south Tel Aviv is rather big. One get along fine with the native language and English—what we Eritreans speak to our brothers from South Sudan. But then how shall we make contact with the native locals? We are living within them, aren’t we?”* He also started making contact with and forging personal relationships with Israelis. He continued with this rhythm of life, taking on several temporary and low-skilled jobs for a couple of years, all the while planning something he could create for himself.

Jonny opened a kindergarten in 2015. *“I wanted to be my own boss and also do something for the community. I did not like to see so many kids who did not know their language, the religion and the culture”*. He decided to give up the financially safer option of working in restaurants and cleaning to open an independent business. For the kindergarten, he had chosen a place that had formally been used for a carpentry business and transformed it into his home and business.

The kindergarten and daycare center is for children of the Eritrean community in south Tel Aviv. Jonny is the sole owner, and his wife, whom he met in Israel, works with him. His clients are exclusively from the Eritrean community, but for his supplies, such as food, toys and equipment, Jonny collaborates with neighboring businesses in south Tel Aviv—an area that can be described as a marginalized multicultural community, comprised of many socially and economically deprived populations.

In 2017, Jonny expanded his business by renting a building across the road from his center. The space was originally intended for another kindergarten business, but the contractors went bankrupt in the setup process. Since demand for kindergartens had been on the rise (there are an estimated 12,000 children from the Eritrean community in south Tel

Aviv), Jonny seized the opportunity and finished renovations on the building himself. The new building is much “fancier” than the first one and is almost fully equipped, which is unique in the asylum seekers’ community. Usually, kindergartens are located in inadequate locations.

Thus, Jonny’s kindergarten currently operates in two buildings for different age groups, from nursery to elementary school children. Jonny provides the children with food, security and educational content. In addition to being a kindergarten, Jonny “rents” parts of the second building for church worship and community events, thereby adding some income: “*Well, I understood that I needed more money to pay the expenses of the growing business. Since we have community meetings and prayers on Sundays, I suggested having them in the kindergarten which is closed on Sundays. Renting out the place for events pays an essential part of the maintenance costs*”. This multiple use of resources was not planned beforehand, but emerged over time. Since he runs the business independently—without financial aid from the municipality—he has had to take loans from the Eritrean community’s members. He has also received donations with the help of Israeli NGOs and sometimes volunteers come to help out. When expanding the kindergarten, Jonny definitely took a considerable financial risk. Fortunately, he seems to have overcome the most difficult first phase.

## 7.4 Individual Enablers and Constraints

*“As soon as the entrance gate of the kindergarten opened, the kids ran towards us, (the authors of this chapter) hugged us and held our hands, enthusiastically demanding our attention”*. Outside the building, next to the entrance, there are photographs pinned to the wall depicting Eritrean culture: women performing a coffee ceremony, a child holding his father’s hand, wildlife and the Tigrinya alphabet. Jonny made his way towards us, between groups of kids. For a moment he stopped to separate a fight. He handled it with a calm, authoritative voice. The two kids who were fighting quickly thereafter kissed one another on the cheek. Jonny then bent over to talk to a little girl who was crying. She calmed down and then went back to play with her friends. Jonny smiled at us. Work never ends in the kindergarten.

Jonny is a handsome man in his 30s with a charming smile. He speaks Tigrinya, English and Hebrew. His wife works with him in the kindergarten, and their daughter, now two years old, joined the kindergarten not long ago. Jonny is an entrepreneur in character.

*“It’s important for me to be a business owner, because business and entrepreneurship are ways to convey a message, to make a positive impact. I keep working with Israelis so that they will know, respect and not be afraid of refugees. The kindergarten influences many children every day positively and therefore also their parents. As a leader, it gives me the possibility to make a difference.”* When following up on his statement about “making a difference”, he explained: *“Well, none of us imagined him or herself in Israel when fleeing our countries. But here we are, things are difficult, so we need to get some control over the situation, some planning ahead, some normality into our lives. I try to create some feeling of community and togetherness in the kindergarten for all people involved”*.

Jonny manages a system of personal connections that helps him maintain the kindergarten. He expands and invests in the growth of his business, but requires more professional business planning in order to make the business profitable. Jonny works to help the community. He sees himself as both a businessman and a social entrepreneur. He says that the business is important mainly because there is a need for it in the community and because it provides the children with some education at a high level of quality in terms of providing for the physical and intellectual needs of the children: *“You should see what goes on in other kindergartens of the refugee community; 25 kids in a small flat, no place to move, to play, or to do anything. Many of the children are in their beds all day”*.

Economically, the kindergarten provides a reasonable income for his family, and they manage to send money on a monthly basis to their family members who remained in Eritrea. Jonny insists, however, that it is not for the money that he works all day. Rather, he does it to take care of the children, feed them, love them and keep them happy and content. The kindergarten is open from 6:00 am until 8:00 pm, and some children go there every day for the entirety of opening hours because their parents work all day, every day. They need to make money to pay the rent, make a living and send some money back to Eritrea.

Jonny has invested a lot of effort in creating a solid relationship with the Eritrean community, and its members constitute his social network. He does not spend money on marketing, but spends time maintaining relationships with people and spreading the word about his business. There is a great demand for his kindergarten, and for this reason, he decided to expand. Parents pay between 600 and 800 NIS per month, depending on their income situation. The monthly net income is around 50,000 NIS, but then rent, taxes, salaries and supplies have to be paid. The children receive a hot lunch every day, which Jonny buys from an Israeli provider in the neighborhood. On Fridays, Eritrean food is served.

## 7.5 Community Enablers and Constraints

Jonny does not get any help from the municipality or the state. As mentioned above, he runs the business on his own, has to pay high sums for property taxes and rents and, at the same time, continues to repay loans he used to open the business. Education is the only welfare service provided unconditionally to the community of asylum seekers in Israel. Thus, there are various educational frameworks in Tel Aviv for children of refugees and migrant workers, and those for children three years of age and older are launched in cooperation with municipalities, following the Israeli compulsory education law. But Jonny's kindergarten for the Eritrean community is unique. There are no significant competitors to the business. Although there are around 100 refugee kindergartens in Israel, the vast majority of which are in south Tel Aviv, Jonny's business is unique. Only a few other kindergartens provide a standard level of quality and care, and only his makes the preservation of cultural heritage of Eritrea, the refugees' country of origin, a priority. Jonny explained his relationship with the community: "*The Eritrean community in Tel Aviv is in need for a solution for their children. Therefore I try to support parents also in guidance of how to raise their children. Everything is so much more difficult here than it was in Eritrea*". Jonny employs only members from the Eritrean community, paying them a decent—above minimum—salary and caring for their children in the kindergarten free of charge. He explained that many young women are single mothers who got pregnant



at a young age. They not only need his help to reduce their monthly expenses, but they also need educational advice. Jonny talks to the children's parents at monthly evening meetings, trying to encourage them to maintain their Eritrean culture at home, speak Tigrinya and maintain the Christian religion, while at the same time adapting to the rather hostile Israeli environment.

Jonny explains that the refugees' children find themselves in a deeply confusing situation in Israel: "*They grow up here, they speak Hebrew, Tel Aviv is their home, Tel Aviv is all they have ever known, and here they go to kindergarten and later to school. But they do realize from a young age that they are unwanted in this society. They realize that they will never be a legitimate part of it. They realize that Israel is not theirs like they wanted to believe, and that their parents are looked upon as 'infiltrators' by the authorities. It is tough growing up and feeling this way*". To further drive home this point, Jonny mentioned a newspaper article which was written about his kindergarten and said: "*I told the reporter—look around—there are no infiltrators here—only children, as all children*". In response to the precarious reality of the refugee community in Israel, Jonny insists on maintaining their Eritrean heritage, so as to ensure the children's ability to reintegrate in Eritrea in the future—which is a major dream shared by all Eritrean refugees, he explained.

## 7.6 Institutional Enablers and Constraints

As shown in the stories presented above, Israel does not provide institutional enablers for refugees undertaking entrepreneurship. Rather, the situation can be characterized as institutional voids. Mair and Marti (2009) define institutional voids as "situations where institutional arrangements that support markets are absent, weak or fail to accomplish the role expected of them" (ibid.: 409). Voids are environments in which present institutions are insufficient (Mair et al. 2012), and this is exactly the situation in Tel Aviv, where due to political policies, government and/or municipality agents do not provide paths towards economic integration for refugees. Furthermore, only very limited educational services are provided to refugee children prior to them entering elementary school. In

addition, once they enter elementary school, extension services are needed, since parents usually work an average of 12 hours per day. It is within this reality that Jonny (and other refugee entrepreneurs) operate. Their entrepreneurial motivation increases because the environment is scarce in resources and poses many social problems. In the absence of sufficient public services to meet the needs of the refugee population, a hybrid form of social/business entrepreneurship emerges, as is the case for Jonny's kindergarten (Dacin et al. 2010; Estrin et al. 2013; Stephan et al. 2015). While navigating the institutional void, Jonny has managed to avoid clashes with the authorities by keeping contact with key agents, such as fire department personnel and others at the health department, in order to obtain and maintain the permissions he requires: *"It's so important to work together with some people of the municipality, because then they see that I am serious and operate the business according to the rules"*.

## 7.7 Methodological Considerations

Gathering the data for this case study has not been easy, despite Jonny having been very cooperative. Since he had previously been interviewed by newspaper journalists, we were able to access some information from those sources, while trying to entice him to join us for an interview. In the end, we talked with him four times (one time via the phone, very late in the evening) and visited the kindergarten three times. All our interviews took place with the kindergarten's staff and children around; there was never a dull moment or a quiet minute. We talked to NGO personnel who are active in the community and drew from previous research regarding the asylum seekers' conditions in Tel Aviv. We contacted the municipality's education department, who informed us that they are aware of the kindergarten but that they do not have the ability or desire to provide it with funds, since there are other facilities available. A constant theme throughout our study was the relationship that exists between the community and the entrepreneurs—those making money for a living and providing for the needs of the community. This came up often in our interviews and in the secondary materials examined.

## 7.8 Concluding Remarks

Jonny is an entrepreneur and he is a bricoleur, possessing resourcefulness and adaptability within the context of the community of asylum seekers in south Tel Aviv, Israel. In line with theory, a bricoleur entrepreneur uses whatever resources he can acquire, through whatever strategy it takes, to promote his entrepreneurial goal (Di Domenico et al. 2010). Bricolage has been used in the entrepreneurship literature to analyze entrepreneurship in resource-poor environments (Baker and Nelson 2005; Garud and Karnøe 2003), with its main components being: “making do”, a refusal to be constrained by limitations imposed by the institutional environment and improvisation (Di Domenico et al. 2010). “Making do” includes the acquisition and combination of resources when taking on novel tasks by using diverse skills (Fisher 2012; Davidsson et al. 2017), when resisting environmental constraints and improvising in terms of creative problem solving. This is exactly what Jonny has been doing within the public sphere of south Tel Aviv. He has set up a kindergarten when faced with many constraints and provides for important needs he has been able to identify. Within this process, he has evolved as a community leader, convincing parents that it is important to foster Eritrean heritage and give children a sense of belonging—something that they will most likely not receive from the wider Israeli community at present. He initially realized his vision by setting up his first kindergarten and then later expanding it profoundly, for and with his community. He did so by combining whatever resources he could acquire. His refusal to accept resource limitations has led him to make use of his kindergarten facilities for weekend community events, thereby leveraging more income while forging connections between the wider community, parents and families to his kindergarten. In a way, he provides a public place—a space where asylum seekers from Eritrea can be themselves. Jonny’s story is a powerful one—about an asylum seeker in Tel Aviv—an entrepreneur and community leader, bricoleuring in an institutional void.

## Notes

1. A worldwide definition of an immigrant who seeks to be recognized as a refugee and be protected by the first safe state s/he enters after fleeing from her/his homeland. Being an asylum seeker puts one in an intermediate state in which an immigrant waits for an answer to a formal request to be recognized as a refugee.

## References

- Anteby-Yemini, Lisa. 2015. Between exclusion and containment: African asylum seekers in Israel's urban space. In *Where Levinsky meets Asmara: Social and legal aspects of Israeli asylum policy*, 227–251. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad (Hebrew).
- Baker, Ted, and Reed E. Nelson. 2005. Creating something from nothing: Resource construction through entrepreneurial Bricolage. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 50 (3): 329–366.
- Barak-Bianco, Anda, and Rebeca Rajjman. 2015. Asylum seeker entrepreneurs in Israel. *Economic Sociology the European Electronic Newsletter* 16 (2): 4–13.
- Dacin, Peter A., M. Tina Dacin, and Margaret Matear. 2010. Social entrepreneurship: Why we don't need a new theory and how we move forward from here. *The Academy of Management Perspectives* 24 (3): 37–57.
- Davidsson, Per, Ted Baker, and Julianne Marie Senyard. 2017. A measure of entrepreneurial bricolage behavior. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research* 23 (1): 114–135.
- Di Domenico, MariaLaura, Helen Haugh, and Paul Tracey. 2010. Social bricolage: Theorizing social value creation in social enterprises. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 34 (4): 681–703.
- EASO (European Asylum Support Office). 2015. *Annual report on the situation of asylum in the European Union 2014*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Estrin, Saul, Julia Korosteleva, and Tomasz Mickiewicz. 2013. Which institutions encourage entrepreneurial growth aspirations? *Journal of Business Venturing* 28 (4): 564–580.
- Fisher, Greg. 2012. Effectuation, causation, and bricolage: A behavioral comparison of emerging theories in entrepreneurship research. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 36 (5): 1019–1051.

- Garud, Raghu, and Peter Karnøe. 2003. Bricolage versus breakthrough: Distributed and embedded agency in technology entrepreneurship. *Research Policy* 32 (2): 277–300.
- Mair, Johanna, and Ignasi Martí. 2009. Entrepreneurship in and around institutional voids: A case study from Bangladesh. *Journal of Business Venturing* 24 (5): 419–435.
- Mair, Johanna, Ignasi Martí, and Marc J. Ventresca. 2012. Building inclusive markets in Rural Bangladesh: How intermediaries work institutional voids. *Academy of Management Journal* 55 (4): 819–850.
- Sabar, Galia. 2010. Israel and the ‘holy land’: The religio-political discourse of rights among African migrant labourers and African asylum seekers, 1990–2008. *African Diaspora* 3 (1): 42–75.
- Stephan, Ute, Lorraine M. Uhlaner, and Christopher Stride. 2015. Institutions and social entrepreneurship: The role of institutional voids, institutional support, and institutional configurations. *Journal of International Business Studies* 46 (3): 308–331.
- Yaron, H., N. Hashimshony-Yaffe, and J. Campbell. 2013. “Infiltrators” or refugees? An analysis of Israel’s policy towards African asylum-seekers. *International Migration* 51 (4): 144–157.