

# 'A chance you'll have only once in your life'

## Cousins flee war-torn land

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — The wildly seesawing emotions still grip Amra Ibrsimovic. On the one hand, Amra couldn't wait to leave behind a land in which civil war has shattered lives over a 31-month period.

However, as her wish finally came true after months of hiding in Croatia as a Muslim refugee from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Amra felt deep sadness rather than elation.

"When I got on the plane, I started crying hysterically because I left part of me behind. That's when it hit me," recalled Amra as tears welled up in her eyes all over again.

Her comments clearly illustrate one of the cruelest realities of wartime: when your homeland is being ransacked, happiness is often a rare commodity — regardless of whether you remain or flee.

Yet both Amra and her cousin, Amela Spahic, realized that they needed to take advantage of an opportunity to come to the United States and once again embrace peace.

"This was a chance that you'll have only once in your life," Amela commented.

Amra and Amela arrived in Rochester this past August following extensive efforts by their Rochester-based relatives to get them here. They currently attend Nazareth Academy, 1001 Lake Ave., where they are in their senior year.

For both 19-year-olds, the months leading up to their arrival here were marked by day-to-day uncertainty.

Escape was difficult from their hometown of Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina, which is currently controlled by Serb forces. This occupation stems from a Bosnian Serb rebellion in April, 1992, after Bosnian Muslims and Croats voted to secede from Serb-dominated Yugoslavia. To date, the Balkan conflict has left approximately 200,000 people dead or missing.

Although Tuzla has been spared from heavy fighting, shelling has steadily increased in the area.

"During a war you start thinking about things you would never (otherwise) think about — would you get food or electricity; would you go to school if there's shelling; would your mother come home alive from work," said Amela. "You think about things that would be stupid to think of in the normal world."

Because they have family members who reside in Rochester, the Muslim cousins decided that a better life might lie ahead if they were to flee and live here. Traveling separately last spring, both managed to escape Bosnia and reach the city of Zagreb, Croatia, where they were required to stay until the necessary paperwork could be processed that would allow them to travel abroad.



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Amra Ibrsimovic (top) and Amela Spahic, Bosnian Muslim seniors attending Nazareth Academy, have lived in Rochester since August. The 19-year-old cousins plan to attend four-year colleges in the United States after graduation.

Amra got permission to leave Tuzla because she said she would be visiting family members who resided in Croatia. Her four-day bus journey to the Croatian border, she recalled, included the sad sight of several burned-out villages. Once she crossed the border, she was forced to remain in hiding for more than three months for fear that Croatian authorities would return her to Bosnia.

Amela's struggles intensified before she ever reached Croatia. She was twice turned back at the border, and her efforts to be smuggled across by armed forces were also unsuccessful. Finally, Amela was able to throw off border patrols by pretending she was having a drunken fight with a Croatian man who posed as her boyfriend but was actually helping her to cross. The patrols, thinking she was a Croat, allowed her through.

Once in Zagreb, Amela endured her own three-month waiting period before she could obtain a visa and come to the United States. She and Amra traveled

together by bus last August to Vienna, Austria; they were then flown to Rochester.

Amra and Amela are being sponsored by their aunt, Nina Shavron, a parishioner at Rochester's St. Ambrose Church. Shavron and her sister, Jasi Ibrsimovic, have organized a resettlement program in Rochester which has assisted 150 Bosnian refugees here in the past year.

Thus far, the cousins seem to be adapting quickly to the American cul-

ture. They share an apartment in Rochester, are learning to drive, and also speak fluent English.

"I'm full of good impressions. I've met a lot of people. They'll never understand what we've been through, but they're trying," said Amra. "When they hug you or give you their hand and they've never seen you, it's a great feeling."

At Nazareth Academy, Amela added, "You don't have to ask, 'Can you help me.' They just say, 'Can I help.'"

Yet Shavron noted that her nieces still struggle emotionally when they are confronted with reminders of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

"They may see a photo, or hear a song, or see something on TV that makes them dissolve into tears. But I know that will slowly go away," remarked Shavron, who herself emigrated in 1969 from Tuzla in what was then known as Yugoslavia.

After graduating from Nazareth, Amra and Amela plan to continue their education in the United States at four-year colleges. They someday plan to return to Tuzla, where each has left behind both their parents.

"We feel guilty because we have everything and they have nothing," said Amra, who noted that the intense fighting has caused a severe shortage of necessary food and supplies all over Bosnia-Herzegovina. "It's still very hard. Your parents try to say that everything is all right and that they have enough food, but I know what it was like for two years."

Amela agreed that the separation has been difficult, but she also points out that her receiving an education will eventually be beneficial for the whole family.

"From here, I can help them more than there," she concluded.

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