

on the MOVE

Story by
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At home — for now

*I am fifteen and maybe far from home
Kosovo is the country I came from
But, where is my home?*

*My family fled fear, anger, hunger
and massacre of my people.
Will I return there? I wonder ...*

*Snow-covered Marion Street
houses the family I love.
Where my family is, is home.*

*The people of Rochester
have made us feel welcome.
So, maybe home will be here*

*Or maybe home will be there.
But my family
Will be with me.*

Arjeta Sahiti's definition of "home," judging from the above poem that she wrote last winter, is wherever her family is. For the foreseeable future, that home will be in Rochester.

Arjeta is gradually becoming more familiar with her new environment. But she still longs for the home she was torn away from less than two years ago. Due to an ethnic war in Kosovo, Arjeta and her family were forced to flee their homeland.

Arjeta, 16, moved with her parents and five siblings to Rochester in June 1999. As a refugee nearly 5,000 miles from her childhood home, Arjeta said she was overwhelmed by homesickness when she first came to Rochester.

"I would just cry — my mom, my dad the same. Because I wanted to go back," Arjeta recalled.

But it wasn't safe to return to Kosovo, a province of Yugoslavia where war has taken a heavy toll.

Arjeta's family are ethnic Albanians, who make up 90 percent of the population of Kosovo. This area of southeastern

Europe has been a center of turmoil ever since Slobodan Milosevic assumed control of the Yugoslavian government in 1989. Milosevic, recently deposed, has denied Kosovo its desired independence, resulting in frequent fighting between ethnic Albanians and Milosevic's Serb forces.

In early 1999, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), led by the United States, began bombing selected sites in Yugoslavia. The Serb government responded by intensifying its "ethnic cleansing" — killing and displacing — of Kosovars. NATO ceased its bombing in June 1999 when the Serbs agreed to a cease-fire and to withdrawal from Kosovo.

By that time, Arjeta's family was gone from their native municipality of Ferzaj.

In the months leading up to her family's flight, Arjeta said, it was common to see Serb military occupying the streets. Arjeta recalled an ominous incident, when her 17-year-old male friend was accosted by Serb officials while she was walking with him.

"The police, they hit him. He was just walking; he wasn't doing anything," Arjeta said.

Arjeta said her family escaped just before heavy fighting hit Ferzaj. Later, on the TV news, she saw her own school going up in flames. In addition, her family's house was partially burned.

"It was a beautiful city when the war started," Arjeta said of Ferzaj.

Arjeta has bitter memories of the brutal treatment inflicted upon her people. Many Kosovars have died at the hands of the Serbs.

"The Serbs were really bad people. They had no mercy. They massacre children," she said.

Arjeta's mother and siblings fled from Ferzaj to the border of Macedonia, which lies south of Kosovo. They were detained there for three weeks until her father was able to join them.

"My father said, 'We can't return to Kosovo,'" she said.

The Sahitis came overseas to Rochester through the help of the Refugee Resettlement Services program at Catholic Family Center. Then, they were resettled by sponsors at Rochester's St. John the Evangelist Parish. The family resides in a two-story house on Marion Street, just a couple of blocks from St. John's Church.

Arjeta, the oldest of six children, speaks English haltingly but clearly. She, her brothers and sisters got a big assist in the summer of 1999 from Sister Kathleen Clary, SSJ, who had just begun a summer program teaching English to refugee children.

"My biggest concern is to help them get ready for school in September," said Sister Clary, who teaches at Corpus Christi School at Blessed Sacrament.

The Sahiti family, she recalled, knew very little English when she met them.

Arjeta is still adapting to her new culture; she is repeating her freshman year at Nazareth Academy. She began a part-time job at a Tops Market near her house in July.

She is also enjoying America's entertainment offerings, having visited such sites as Strong



Arjeta Sahiti (left), 16, tries to get the ball from Anne McQueen, 12, at Nazareth Academy soccer practice Oct. 4 at Canal Park in Greece. Arjeta moved with her family from Kosovo to Rochester in June of 1999.

Museum and the Darien Lake and Sea Breeze amusement parks. Her favorite musical group is 'N Sync; she enjoys pizza and McDonald's; and her top television show is Rosie O'Donnell.

How long will Arjeta stay here? A quick return to Kosovo is unlikely. Since the Sahitis moved here, fighting has subsided in NATO-occupied Kosovo. But there are still occasional clashes involving NATO, the Albanians and the Serbs. So although Arjeta's family has the option of returning to Kosovo, instead her parents are in the process of purchasing the house where they now live. All of Arjeta's siblings are enrolled in the Nazareth Schools, and both her parents have found work — her mother in a bakery, and her father as a cable company technician.

"If we return to Kosovo, we don't have a house," Arjeta remarked.

Arjeta expressed relief that none of her family or friends back in Ferzaj were injured or killed in the war. However, she was upset that after she moved to Rochester, her grandmother died and she could not attend the funeral.

Arjeta does plan to eventually return to her native land. By that time, she predicted, her knowledge of the English language will provide a career springboard.

"I'm going to stay here and finish high school, and go back to Kosovo and be an English teacher," she said.

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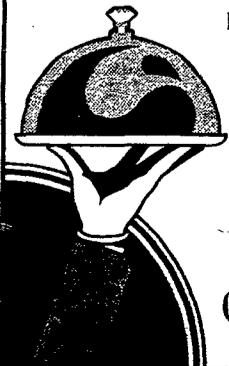
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