

From Kosovo to the United States

New Homes

Hello! My name is Isau Ajeti. I was born in Shtime, Kosovo, September 1988. I am an ethnic Albanian.

When I was two years old, my family moved to Germany. My two sisters, Serxhane and Arjeta, were born here. Seven years later, we returned to Shtime and built a beautiful two-story house.

My uncle and aunt lived in the house next to ours. They have three daughters—Remzie, Majlinda, and Nazlia—all younger than I am.

I never went to school in Kosovo. I was too young at first, and then later, it was too dangerous. My country was at war.

One day in April 1999, we looked outside and saw houses on fire. "Go! Go!" someone ran down the street shouting, "The enemy is coming!"

Right away our two families fled from Shtime. For two hours, we journeyed toward Vojnovc, a country town. Like us, hundreds of people filled the roads, trying to escape.

In Vojnovc, a family let us stay with them. More than 35 people crowded together in their small house. We shared whatever food there was.

After two weeks, we headed toward Ferijaj, my mother's hometown. War planes flew overhead. There was shooting on the ground. Six hours later, we reached Ferijaj. All our relatives, except one, were gone.

Ferijaj has a train station. We wanted to take a train to leave Kosovo. But with so many people, all the doors of the train were blocked. Someone opened a window. My father put me in first; then I pulled in the other five children, beginning with my five-month old cousin. Finally, the four grown-ups crawled through the small space.

It was very hot on the train. We were packed like sardines. We could hardly breathe. Hungry, tired and dirty, children were crying.

Riding for three hours, we got to the border of Macedonia, but the Serbian police stopped us. "You cannot get off the train," they said, "Go back."

We did.

The next day, we tried again. This time the border was opened to us. But the Serbian soldiers commanded, "Stay right on the railroad

tracks. If you go to the right or left, we will kill you."

So, we walked, two by two inside the tracks, right into Macedonia.

What a difference it was for us there! NATO soldiers welcomed us and fed us. They gave us blankets and even diapers for my two little cousins.

Camp workers brought us to a small tent. It was very low—the grown-ups could not stand up straight in it. It rained outside. My father and my uncle took off their jackets and put them under us. We were cold because we didn't have enough blankets, but at least we were together.

Each morning we waited in line for food, sometimes until 1:00 p.m. The camp was dirty. We missed the bathrooms we had in our new homes in Shtime.

My father was in charge of both families. In one of the tents was a big board. Every night we checked it for his name and our camp number. It would tell us when and where we would be sent.

Finally, my mother's mother and another uncle left for Germany. We wanted to go with them, but we were separated. After five weeks in Macedonia, the rest of us flew to New Jersey, in the United States.

American soldiers brought us to Fort Dix where our Christian sponsors were waiting. Soon, a lady named Debbie and an Armenian man named Steve arrived. They brought flowers for my mother and my aunt. They were so nice. It didn't matter to them that we were Muslims.

Our sponsors found us two apartments next to each other. They helped us get groceries, clothes, furniture, medicine and jobs.

In June, a newspaper reported our story. A retired teacher read it and offered to teach English to me and my two older cousins, to prepare us for school. All summer we sat outdoors and learned the alphabet, numbers, colors and telling time. We love our very first American teacher.

In fall, we started school. At first everything was strange, but our teacher and classmates were wonderful, helping us learn English quickly.

Now, America is our new home.

—Told by Isau Ajeti; written by Blanche Gosselin, the retired English teacher in this story.



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