

Inside a safe haven

by Helen Basili.

What does it feel like to lose everything, and then be flown across the world for a temporary stay in a foreign country? Three Kosovar refugees tell their story.

"We just can't imagine why this has happened to us," says Fatbardha Haliti. "Everything we had established over 30 years was destroyed in one minute." As the Kosovar refugees bask in their newfound safe havens, the terrible reality begins to sink in. There are sleepless nights and long days in which to contemplate the enormity of their losses. Fatbardha Haliti is not alone in her disbelief.

Ismaïl Sahiti left his family home in Pristina with his wife, daughter and one bag of belongings. "They [Serb soldiers] knock on your door and tell you to get out. If they are good they don't kill you. In my street they were half-good. We are lucky. We are still alive. If you are unlucky you die." Sahiti and his family caught a train from Pristina to the border of Macedonia. "It was dangerous. Serb [soldiers] patrol the trains but you take the risk because you don't want to live like this."

Ismaïl's uncle, Avdush Sahiti, fled Pristina with only a small amount of cash and 10 cigarettes in his pocket. He had been forbidden to work during the last few years of Serb occupation and lived in a single room with his wife and two children. It was a spartan existence. Avdush Sahiti had few possessions worth taking with him.

At the East Hills safe haven in southwestern Sydney, these Kosovar refugees have been struggling to make sense of the horrors they have experienced. At the same time, they are trying to make the best of their situation in Australia and regain a

sense of control over their lives. Ismaïl Sahiti has been holding tai kwon do classes for his fellow safe haven residents. Fatbardha Haliti wants to teach or work with mothers at the safe haven. Avdush Sahiti cleans and does whatever else he can to help out. There is talk of establishing a community garden. People are buzzing with ideas and motivation.

Recently, a committee was formed to organise celebrations for Kosovo Independence Day on 2 July. A crowd of 300 Kosovars gathered on the day at the sports field normally reserved for soccer matches. They were entertained by their fellow countrymen and women who read poems, played music and spoke of their desire for a free Kosovo. The

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Australian and Albanian flags were flown in tandem. A band, formed especially for the occasion, had spent the previous week rehearsing to a group of enthusiastic children.

"It is a wonderful day for us to forget all the bad things and have a few nice moments," said Fatbardha Haliti.

The news that the Kosovar refugees will be able to work for up to 20 hours per week has been well received. Many of the refugees have been feeling bored and restless and have long been expressing a desire to work. "If I am allowed to, I would like to work outside the camp," says Fatbardha Haliti. "Maybe if we were

working we would be distanced from our thoughts. For a time, you can more easily forget your experiences."

For Avdush Sahiti, being able to work would be a demonstration of the gratitude he feels towards the Australian people. He does not care about money, he says, he just wants to be able to give something back to the country that offered him shelter. "I am happy in Australia. I have money, a house and clothes. I want nothing more," he says.

The "house" that Sahiti refers to is a small unit in the East Hills complex. It consists of only three rooms: two neat and simple bedrooms and a bathroom. His two children play quietly on the floor with the toys that were given to them upon their arrival

and in the cupboard are clothes that have been donated. The walls are plain white with no pictures and the only item to adorn a shelf above the bed is a copy of the Koran.

Beneath Sahiti's words lies a sense of the indignity he feels at not being able to provide for his family. A plumber by trade, he has worked hard all his life until he was prevented from doing so by the Serb authorities. The concept of receiving goods and services without having worked for them is something he has difficulty coming to terms with. "It is very hard not to work," he says.

Avdush and Ismaïl Sahiti are keen to emphasise the regret they feel over the Albanian refugees they describe as "troublemakers", those who protested over conditions in the safe haven at Singleton. Again and

STARTTS & Operation Safe Haven

Organising 4000 Kosovar refugees to come to Australia for three months is a complex task. A diverse range of services have been required to cooperate and make Operation Safe Haven a success.

STARTTS' involvement has extended from training interpreters and other staff working closely with the refugees to providing crisis counselling and longer-term therapy to the refugees themselves. "We are in a good position to provide those services because we have a lot of experience in working with refugees. Many of our staff have worked in refugee camp situations," says STARTTS' Executive Director, Jorge Aroche.

In the coming weeks STARTTS will be organising groups and other therapeutic interventions at the NSW safe havens in East Hills and Singleton. It will also continue to provide counselling at these havens and assist other services in devising community development activities for the refugees.

The symptoms the refugees have been experiencing as a result of their trauma are varied. Counsellors have noticed that sleeping disorders, in particular insomnia and nightmares have been prevalent. "Some people appear to be depressed but that doesn't express itself as readily as other symptomatology like flashbacks and insomnia. Surprisingly few have really expressed suicidal ideation," says Jorge Aroche.

New counsellors have been employed by STARTTS to work at the East Hills and Singleton safe havens. They will provide support to the refugees for the duration of their stay in Australia.



Fatbardha Haliti with her son

Photo by Dennis Jones

again they come back to this point. "I was reading in your newspapers [an article that said] 'ungrateful Albanian refugees'. It is not good. When you are in trauma you say things you don't want to say," explains Ismail. Avdush is less forgiving. He says that the protesters must have been Albanians from Serbia proper - *his* people would never behave so outlandishly.

The depth of gratitude felt by the Kosovar Albanians towards every day Australians is overwhelming. On a notice board outside the East Hill's canteen are several children's drawings with the caption "Thank you Australia". Visitors are greeted by numerous cries of "hello", especially from the children. "Australians seem to be a people that have a huge heart and a wonderful passion to help people," says Fatbardha Haliti.

With 875 residents who will stay for at least two more months, the East Hills safe haven has acquired something of a village atmosphere. Classes have just commenced for school aged children and adults are to begin learning English. Elderly men sit in the afternoon sun playing cards and women gather in large groups, their babies beside them in strollers. Girls dance in a central hall, boys play soccer and men try their luck at pool.

This semblance of normality masks the painful memories that the refugees are just beginning to process. "We look normal but we are not normal. All the time we are under pressure," says Ismail.

Avdush Sahiti only sleeps two or three hours a night, visions of his escape preventing him from rest: "I saw a massacre. I saw many dead people and many dead animals," he says.

He is also fearful that his four-year-old daughter has been irrevocably damaged by her experience. Since their escape, she has been introverted and withdrawn. "Before, she used to play outside all day. Now she won't go anywhere without her mother," says Avdush. He recounts one of the events that she found particularly distressing: "It was midnight and there was a big explosion. She was crying. I tried to lie and said that I had broken something in the bathroom. She knew I was lying and asked 'can we go away somewhere?'"

The commencement of tracing operations by the Red Cross at the safe havens may bring more bad news to contend with as residents discover that family members are dead or missing. This is likely to put increased pressure on counsellors working at the sites as they assist residents to deal with yet another trauma.

Despite all that has happened, many refugees are able to find the spirit to consider a brighter future. Fatbardha longs for the day when she can return to a peaceful Kosovo. Avdush is still holding on to a cherished dream: "I'd like to have just a little house for my wife and children. I'd like to be a free man. If I am free I have everything." ●