

An Instance



of War

A couple shares their story of peace, war, and their escape from Bosnia



They stood side by side, trembling, with their faces pressed against the wall and a dagger-wielding Chetnik soldier at their backs. Frank kept his eyes targeted on Nezira, who was holding onto their toddler and the baby that had been born just forty days earlier. “Why is that baby crying?” yelled the soldier through a beard and mustache knitted together so thickly they couldn’t see his lips. “I’m not doing anything to hurt her,” he growled.

This is what babies do, Frank thought. But he thought best not to speak. “I have two babies,” said the soldier. “But I never had a chance to see them.” The soldier looked weary and agitated. He finally shouted a command strung somewhere between rage and longing: “Move on!”

Hurriedly, Frank shepherded his family back into the car before the soldier changed his mind. Frank smashed the accelerator and sped through the checkpoint. A few miles later, he pried his eyes from the road and stole a glance at Nezira, who was clutching Zana and Ilma to her breast. Just yesterday, Frank had been working in his father’s metal shop and playing with

his children. Now, he was racing to save his family’s life.

GROWING UP BOSNIAN

Frank Zulcic, a *Bosniak*, had grown up in diverse Višegrad, a small town in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina situated near the Serbian border (then Yugoslavia). He had played basketball with his Bosnian, Serb, Croat, and Slovenian neighbors. They traded pita and dolma from their lunch bags, read the classics, and studied Hermann Hesse together in school. Their fathers worked side by side and taught their sons to be providers and protectors. This was life for everyone in Višegrad, regardless of ethnic background or religion.

Frank and Nezira had planned to raise their children in Višegrad surrounded by extended family, just as their parents and grandparents had done. Family was the nucleus of their lives. Most evenings found them gathered around the table eating *bosanski lonac* (hot pot stew), often prepared by the men. After dinner, they’d sip *kafa* (coffee) and sometimes a small glass of *rakija*, homemade plum brandy. They’d retell stories passed down from ▶

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generations. They'd sing and sometimes go for *korzo*, a nighttime stroll along the main street. They were happy, but in an instant, all that would change.

RUMORS OF WAR

In April 1992, Frank and Nezira began hearing rumors of war from the neighboring cities of Bjeljina and Foca. Communism had fallen in Eastern Europe, and several republics of Yugoslavia, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, had declared their independence, setting off a civil war. "There was no hate before the war," Nezira lamented. "All nations, we are friends," Frank said.

It's not that Bosnia had never known war. The region had been invaded several times over many centuries. But ethnically diverse Višegrad had known relative peace for decades. Višegrad had no army. And some, like Nezira's father, dismissed the threats as political muscle-flexing. Other men stole away in the middle of the night, heading for the mountains to train themselves for battle and form their own army. Frank participated at first; however, wanting to secure his family, Frank decided that they must flee Višegrad.

Nezira and baby Ilma had just reached *babinja* (the period after the baby reaches forty days old, when mother and child are ready to receive visitors). Nezira hurriedly stuffed a woven bag with diapers and baby clothes and threw it in the back seat of the car. Frank sped off with Nezira, three-year-old Zana, and baby Ilma. They had driven about fifty miles when the Chet-



Frank, Nazira, Ilma and Zana

niks (paramilitary Serbs) stopped them. When they reached the next city, Frank sold their only possession—their car—and bought train tickets to Germany, a country friendly to Bosnian refugees.

Frank and Nezira Zulcic made it to Germany two weeks later. "We had on the same clothes from when we left Bosnia—no showers—we didn't smell good. We were homeless," Frank said. In May, a month later, they learned that local Serbs and some paramilitaries had begun a campaign to rid Višegrad of its Bosniak population. They pillaged the town and killed many men and male adolescents. There were reports of rape and of people burned alive in their homes. A month after their escape, Frank and Nezira received news that both their fathers had been murdered.

PUSHING FORWARD

Frank and Nezira grieved heavily. The

core of their existence—the stability of family—had been snatched from them in an instant. But they knew they had to push forward for their children. They lived in Germany for five years, the maximum time allowed to refugees, and then moved to the United States. "We had heard how beautiful California was," Frank said. Frank's first job in California was tossing pizza dough and waiting on customers at Numero Uno in Pasadena. "I didn't speak English and could count out the change only in German or Bosnian," he said. He also worked part-time as a plumber.

They lived in California for ten years and bought their first home and a plumbing business there. They had friends in Georgetown, Texas, and had visited them on several occasions. They thought Georgetown would be a good place to do business, and since Zana had earned admission to Southwestern University, the timing was good.

Frank and Nezira sold their California interests, using the proceeds to move to Georgetown. They purchased a worn-down building on University Avenue, refurbished it, and opened Tony and Luigi's Restaurante in 2007. Why Italian? "Italian cooking is similar to Bosnian," Frank said.

Last year, Frank and Nezira returned to Višegrad for her father's funeral. Authorities had located the bones of hundreds of Bosniaks who had been killed and dumped in the Drina River. DNA testing identified Nezira's father's bones. Frank's father's remains were never found.

Though there are significantly fewer Bosniaks there now, if you were to visit Višegrad today, you'd find various ethnic groups coexisting in relative peace, as if the war never happened. Frank and Nezira don't talk much about their escape from Bosnia. Though they miss the country of their birth, they are happy to live freely in America. They work hard at growing their restaurant business, and family remains the nucleus of their lives. Their daughters Ilma and Zana are in their early and mid-twenties. What do Frank and Nezira wish for them? "That they remain healthy, get a good education, and find their own happiness," Nezira said. Hopefully, they will never know the devastation of war. ■

