



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

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**The U. S. Kosovar Refugee Program: Operation Provide
Refuge**

by

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The U.S. Kosovar Refugee Program: Operation Provide Refuge

BY PEGGY SEUFERT

“**W**e’re a little nervous about going home. We don’t know anything about our family or our house since the phone lines have not been restored. We’d like to come back to the USA—not as refugees, but as tourists.” Albanian Kosovar family in Virginia

After months of horrific stories and pictures of ethnic Albanians fleeing Kosova, the media focus is shifting, and these refugees no longer occupy all the headlines and news reports. Yet, for the ethnic Albanian Kosovars in ESL classes across the United States, the story is not over and the physical, financial, and emotional losses are still in the forefront. Fortunately, most of the Kosovar refugees will survive and even thrive like millions of other refugees and immigrants who have been torn from their countries due to war and internal strife. But unlike other refugee groups who have come to the United States before them, the Albanian Kosovars who came through Macedonia on U.S. government funded flights during May, June and July have the option of returning home with a ticket paid for by the U.S. government.

Cultural Close-up

For many of the Albanian Kosovars, the decision to return will be easy, especially for those who are older. The Albanians are justifiably a very proud people with an intense sense of family cohesion and nationalism. They all seek to be reunited with their families, which tend to be larger, especially in rural areas, than those of other ethnic groups in the region. And they yearn to know what is left of their homeland and their former way of life.

When asked to describe the ethnic Albanian people of Kosova, one recent émigré said that although 95% are Muslim, they are secular in terms of

most religious practices and dress, but they do not eat pork. They can be described as an entrepreneurial people because private business was allowed in Yugoslavia and because they often had to live by their wits when they lost their jobs after 1989 as Serbia denied autonomy to Kosova. They are a “coffee culture” that loves to sip tea or coffee and discuss politics and family. Ethnic Albanian folklore is kept alive through music, songs, poetry, and dance. And like people from most countries, they idolize their national

heroes such as Skenderbeg (the military leader who fought off the Ottoman Turks), Ismail Qamajl (who proclaimed Albanian independence), Ismail Kadere (the writer nominated several times for a Nobel Prize for Literature) and Fan Noli (leader of the Albanian Orthodox Church, literary critic, intellectual and politician).

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Equally important to note is that the ethnic Albanians are a sensitive people. One must be careful in how things are said in order not to offend. When asked for examples of this sensitivity, one cultural informant said the Albanian Kosovars think highly of President Clinton because “he pro-

nounces the name of the province correctly.” *KoSOva* with the stress on the second *o* is the Albanian name for the province. *KOSovo* with stress on the first *o* is the Serbian name for the province.

Although linguists note some Slavic borrowings in the Albanian language spoken by the Kosovars, this group may be offended when they are called “Slavs” or their language “Slavic.” And even if they once studied the Serbo-Croatian language and had friends and colleagues who were Serbs, most will not want to use any Bosnian-Serbian-Croatian translations even when there is no Albanian translation available.

Compared to people from other Eastern bloc countries prior to 1989, the Yugoslavs had more access to western culture, events, thought, and popular media. They were able to travel, read and listen to foreign correspondents, and keep up with popular trends in Europe and other parts of the world. The people of Kosova living in cities and towns were widely exposed to western languages and ideas through print media, television, movies, and radio. Both movies and television were subtitled so that people regularly heard other languages spoken and were aware of international issues and styles. In the 1990s contact with English was intensified with satellite television, computers and, more recently, the Internet.

Employment and Education

The constitutional changes of 1989 led to more Serbian authority in Kosova and less autonomy for the Albanian majority of Kosova, especially in education and employment. Although faculty and students in schools and at the university level maintained the hope that Albanians would not be expelled or fired, they noted that all decisions were being made by Serbs. Slowly,



one-by-one, faculty were dismissed under the claim that they were not recognizing the administration. By 1990-1991, Albanian students were no longer allowed in universities and were forced to improvise with "an underground university." Similarly, high schools (equivalent to grades 9-12) were closed to Albanians who continued their education quietly in makeshift classrooms in their homes. In the primary grades (equivalent to grades 1-8), Albanians were allowed to study but in separate spaces or during different shifts (for example, after 5:00 p.m.).

Ethnic Albanians were no longer allowed to practice their professions. People with degrees struggled to make a living. Some professionals even became vendors; they became very imaginative to earn a living. A 43-year-old Albanian Kosovar in Brooklyn described his experience: "I was an auditor. I had a good business. I was well-known. I had a nice house, and we could buy things until 1989. Then I started doing odd jobs. I was lucky I could do bookkeeping. Now, I have nothing but financial difficulties."

This Serb control was just part of the history of conflict that has brought thousands of Kosovar refugees to the United States.

A Unique Refugee Program—Operation Provide Refuge

From May 5 to July 9, 1999, the Military Training Center at Fort Dix, New Jersey, became the site for Operation Provide Refuge. In response to the critical situation in overcrowded asylum camps in neighboring Macedonia, the U.S. government agreed to airlift thousands of refugees to the United States. Approximately 13,000 Albanian Kosovars came to the United States from Macedonia. Four thousand forty-two passed through Fort Dix while the others, most of whom had relatives in the United States, traveled directly

from Macedonia to their new homes in 40 states across the country including New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Illinois (Chicago), California, Texas and Florida—places with both large and small immigrant communities.

The Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) coordinated this large refugee processing center so that Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) interviews, security and

densed with literally thousands of volunteers (e.g., Red Cross, Joint Voluntary Agency, Albanian Americans, active and reserve military personnel, high school students, teachers on summer break, retired people, etc.) providing as much assistance and language input as possible. The outpouring of good will and donations exceeded all expectations. An Albanian Kosovar in Virginia explained, "When I return to Kosova, I will tell people about how humane and hospitable the Americans were. I had no problems."

Airlift planes landed at nearby Fort McGuire and the refugees were transported by bus to the "Arrival Processing Gym" where over 400 people were heartily welcomed, interviewed, offered sandwiches and water, and then photographed and fingerprinted within a few hours.

After picking up their few possessions, families with children received strollers and everyone received a picture ID card before moving into their temporary housing. Each family unit of four was provided a room in one of the dormitories, which also offered rooms for prayer, play, television, laundry, clothes distribution, and security on the ground

level. Meals were taken in a large cafeteria-style dining hall which was located next to the health clinic. With just a two-minute walk, refugees could visit the Internet computer lab, the multi-denominational religious center, numerous playing fields, and the "Arrival Gym" where people anxiously gathered to scan the faces of new busloads of refugees to find even one familiar face.

Much of life revolved around processing routines and long conversations at the picnic tables throughout the "Village," as Fort Dix became known. Every so often one could hear chimes and see children running to the



Over 4,000 refugees of all ages were assisted by Operation Provide Refuge.

medical screenings, and educational programs could be initiated while sponsoring communities were identified and preparations made. Whereas refugee processing overseas typically takes four to six months or longer, the staff at Fort Dix (ORR, Army and Airforce, Immigration and Refugee Services of America, U.S. Public Health Service, INS, etc.) worked diligently to complete processing within 19-21 days. Everything became con-

ice cream trucks delivering donated treats. The ever present Red Cross Volunteers circulated and provided first aid as well as snacks and water. As the number of Kosovars increased, additional housing was established in the "Hamlet" a short bus ride away. Although security was evident with military check points at every entry and exit, the snow fence perimeter was not too menacing. The American military personnel represented a mix of genders, races, and backgrounds and served not only soldiers, but also as friends, tutors, coaches, distributors, and mediators.

The ESL Program

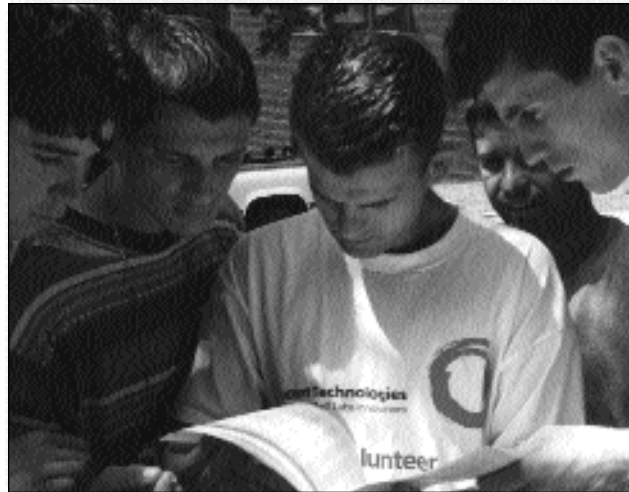
Within ten days of the arrival of the first plane from Macedonia, staff from the Spring International Institute of Denver, Colorado, began offering ESL classes to children and adults in either the playrooms or television rooms located in each building. At any given time, eight to ten two-hour classes were being held. With a paid teaching staff of eight and over 32 volunteers recruited largely through Burlington County College, there were between 20 and 130 classes being offered each day, reaching almost half the Kosovars who passed through Fort Dix. During the peak week, there were 1,300 adults, teens, and children attending ESL classes. Staff noted that women found it more convenient to attend ESL classes in the same room as their children. Although attendance was not mandatory, many refugees (especially the children and young adults) came to class five days a week until they departed for their resettlement sites elsewhere in the United States.

The ESL curriculum focused on the basic language the refugees would need during their initial month of resettlement. The children's curriculum was modeled after elementary school ESL curricula and included songs, games, drawing, role playing, and reading from donated children's books. For the adults, the content included the following functional tasks in a variety of contexts:

- ◆ Greeting people, making introductions and small talk;
- ◆ Requesting clarification and

responding to requests for clarification;

- ◆ Being interviewed (asking and answering questions) and completing forms at social service offices, schools, health centers, workplaces, etc.;
- ◆ Asking and answering questions and describing health problems;
- ◆ Getting around a community by public transportation and following directions;
- ◆ Making emergency phone calls using pay phones and phone cards;
- ◆ Shopping for food, clothing, household items, hygiene and cleaning supplies;
- ◆ Reading schedules for work,



Refugees and volunteers consult a book that lists family departures from Fort Dix.

transportation, and store or office hours of operation;

- ◆ Making appointments for medical visits, job interviews, etc.

Cultural Orientation Program

An introduction to life in the United States was provided through the Cultural Orientation Program as part of the processing for resettlement in the United States. Over 1,000 people representing 70% of the families attended either the six- or nine-hour orientation program that was conducted in Albanian over two to three days during the week prior to each family's departure from Fort Dix.

The trainers used a combination of lecture and participatory methods so that essential information was conveyed and refugees had the opportunity to process information and ask questions. For example, one activity asked groups to create a budget for a family using what they had learned

about wages, rent, utilities, food and other costs. As the language trainers noted, the Kosovars displayed no reluctance to working in groups and actively participating. When asked why the Kosovars appeared to accept group work more readily than people from other countries, a Macedonian-Albanian linguist trained at Pristina University in Kosovo said that language teachers had been using "western or more learner-centered" approaches even in the 1980s. However, she noted that although Albanians enjoy and work well in groups, decision making and consensus building are extremely difficult.

Kosovars in U.S.

ESL Classrooms

As of mid-August 1999, approximately 10% of the Albanian Kosovars have elected to return home. It is anticipated that up to 30% will eventually return as the situation in Kosova improves. As the remaining Kosovars settle across the United States, either temporarily or permanently, ESL teachers will serve them in their classrooms both as language instructors and as cultural brokers helping refugees navigate local systems and adjust to their communities.

Kosovars will bring a rich linguistic background to the classroom. Prior to 1989, Serbo-Croatian was the official language of Yugoslavia and was regularly taught in schools. Albanian-speaking students, therefore, became accustomed to both the Cyrillic alphabet of Serbo-Croatian and the Latin alphabet of Albanian. And as in many European countries, foreign language instruction (usually French, English or Russian) started during the fifth year of primary school and continued throughout high school.

Albanian is a phonemic language with 36 letters representing 36 sounds. When learning English, Albanian speakers have the advantage of being familiar with many of the sounds that often cause problems for other learners. For example, Albanian has both the [f] and [v] sounds, [sh] and [ch] sounds, and even the [th] sounds. However, Albanian-speaking students will struggle in distinguishing the [w] and [v] sounds. Many of the teachers

who taught at Fort Dix laughed when asked about pronunciation problems among the Kosovars, saying, "The students have few problems; it's the teachers who struggle trying to pronounce their names!"

Coming from an educational system that values rule memorization, the Albanians learn grammar with relative ease and have few difficulties due to language transfer. Teachers will note that vocabulary is learned easily as there are a fair number of cognates with other languages. Many of the younger refugees will have studied English and picked up a great deal through the media. On the other hand, many of the adults over 50, especially those from more rural areas, will not have had the same exposure. The older

generation may also be somewhat intimidated by returning to the classroom after so many years and being seen as struggling by the younger generation.

Albanian-speaking students will not be familiar with articles (a, an, the), which are difficult for beginners and often used incorrectly even by more proficient Albanian English speakers. Likewise, since word order is not as critical in Albanian, teachers might note students struggling with sentence structure and word order especially in their written work.

Another learning challenge for Albanian speakers might be the use of auxiliaries in forming questions and negative sentences. For example, it is not uncommon to hear a learner say-

ing something like "Did you went to the movies last night?" And similar to many other learners, the Kosovars will often confuse word order in noun phrases and produce sentences such as "I have appointment clinic 10:00 Wednesday." They will need practice using cuisenaire rods, scrambled sentences or other activities focusing on word order.

Beyond Teaching Language

In addition to teaching language, ESL teachers will also need to assist refugees in other aspects of their transition. During a refugee's first year in the United States, there are many emotional ups and downs. Adjusting to a completely new way of life is very difficult. Many refugees struggle with

About U.S. Refugee Resettlement Programs

Refugee Status

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are approximately 23 million refugees and internally displaced people in the world. An estimated 850,000 ethnic Albanians fled Kosova during the war in the spring of 1999.

"A refugee is someone who has fled across a national border from his or her home country, or who is unable to return to it because of a well-founded fear that he or she will be persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or for being a member of a particular social group." Refugee status for Kosovars was initiated in late April 1999. As conditions in Kosova remain tenuous, the refugee program for Kosova remains in effect. UNHCR estimated that nearly 90% of the ethnic Albanians had returned to the Serbian province as of August 4, 1999.

Eligibility for Resettlement

Refugees are processed in four steps: refugee interview and screening; security check; medical check and sponsorship (family petition or voluntary agency); and admissions inspection. The U.S. Department of State has developed a system of processing priorities based on information from the UNHCR and referrals from U.S. embassies. Joint Voluntary Agency representatives conduct pre-screening interviews in many parts of the world and then prepare cases for submission to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Simultaneously, overseas staff conduct security and medical checks while U.S. refugee programs identify sponsors for each refugee family. INS then makes the final determination of refugee status and admissibility to the United States refugee program.

Whenever possible, refugees are reunited with their families who agree to provide sponsorship. For refugees without relatives or close friends in the U.S., the volunteer agencies (VOLAGs) will identify a local resettlement program that has agreed to be the sponsor. These programs work with community groups to provide support to the newly arrived refugees (e.g., donations, tutoring, transportation, rent assistance, etc.).

Responsibilities of Local Resettlement Programs

The local resettlement programs are responsible for providing all essential services for the first 30 days. They receive

a designated amount of money and rely heavily on other sources of assistance from the community. Services include:

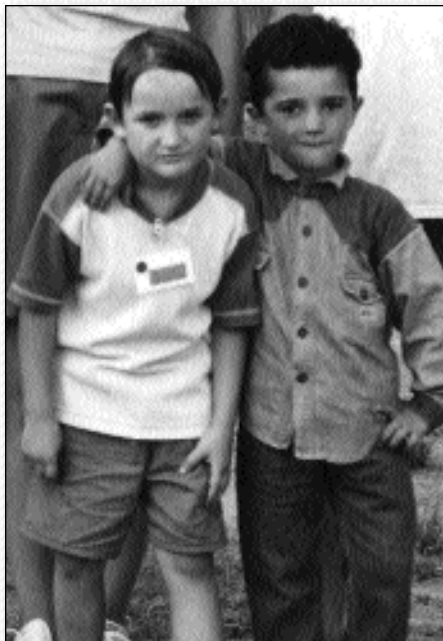
- Opening a case management file with complete family history and copies of all documents;
- Providing housing with basic furniture, clothing, and supplies, which are often "second hand" donations;
- Providing basic orientation to living in the United States and local community;
- Making sure that local medical screening requirements have been met and any needs for follow-up care are noted by local health services;
- Enrolling children in school and registering persons 18 and over in adult education classes (usually ESL);
- Referring or taking refugees to the various offices to apply for Social Security Cards, Refugee Medical Assistance, Food Stamps or Vouchers (if available). If a refugee is "unemployable," the resettlement program will help them apply for Refugee Cash Assistance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for those who are over 65, blind or disabled.
- Enrolling adults (18 or over) for employment assistance, which includes counseling, application and interview assistance, and referrals. Most refugees' first jobs in the United States are entry level until they have sufficient English and a work history. Refugees with professional degrees often have to work for years while they "re-train" and become recertified. The goal is "early self-sufficiency" and is based on the belief that it is best for refugees to enter the U.S. workplace as soon as possible and study English simultaneously. By working, refugees learn not only the language but also gain employment experience that will allow them to move into better jobs. Working promotes self-reliance and independence.

Refugee programs continue to provide support services and referrals to the refugees for six months, and some programs will have additional funding so they can provide financial support beyond the first 30 days.

diminished status or shifts in familiar roles. For example, children may become adept at living in the United States more quickly than their elders and are sometimes thrust into roles as translators. Women often get jobs outside the homes for the first time in their lives and may even earn more money than their spouses. Medical doctors may have to take jobs as health care aides or nursing assistants.

Of course, past experiences and doubts about the future will also be sources of emotional stress. For many refugees coming from formerly communist countries or "welfare states," it can be quite stressful having to take risks and live in a competitive society surrounded by tempting, expensive consumer goods.

The question of returning to Kosova or staying in the United States will weigh heavily on the refugee's minds. Sometimes one family member will return to look for the rest of the family, so they will have legal questions regarding travel. Usually a local resettlement agency has the information, and they will continue to provide counsel (and sometimes financial assistance) after the agency's 30-day obligation has been met. An ESL pro-



One concern of refugees is their desire to provide a better future for their children.

gram should actively collaborate with local community agencies (who often have bilingual staff) to help the refugees connect with employment training, counseling, and transportation and childcare providers.

Finally, refugees usually have financial concerns that can be addressed in the ESL classroom through units on community services, shopping, budgeting, job advancement, etc. Another concern of refugees is their desire to provide a better future for their children, so they will have many questions related to education, safety, and health care.

Effective teachers will work with the students to identify their needs and goals and then prepare activities, readings, trips, projects and guest speakers to bring the community into the classroom as well as help refugees take part in their new communities. In addition, a focus on the basic language skills that the refugees can immediately put to use in their daily lives will provide early success using English and promote continued learning and emotional well-being.

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Recommended Reading

- ▶ *Kosovo: A Short History* by Noel Malcolm is a serious book but enjoyable reading. Malcolm provides good historical data and cultural connections.
- ▶ *The Albanians* by Edwin Jacques begins with the Ilyrians in 168 B.C. and brings the reader up to the 1990s with Sali Barisha, former president of Albania.

Recommended Web Sites

Several great Web sites offer a range of information about the Kosova crisis, history, culture, language and religion, U.S. refugee policy response, and advocacy networks.

News and Refugee Assistance

- ▶ The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) site provides information about crises, press releases, and a list of nongovernmental organizations to contact if you would like to help and links to other sites. <http://kosovo.info.usaid.gov>
- ▶ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has statistics and reports on Kosova as well as background information on refugees and asylum seekers from Kosova. <http://unhcr.ch>
- ▶ Kosovo Crisis Center was recently created by Albanian students and professionals and has updates from the U.S. and international press, culture notes, links, and even a family tracking research tool. <http://www.alb-net.com>
- ▶ International Crisis Group includes projects and reports about Kosova. See projects in the southern Balkans, especially the Kosova spring report. <http://www.crisisweb.org>

- ▶ Institute for War and Peace Reports: Balkan Crisis Reports has a log of articles. The April 29/Issue 26 has a story by Armend, a young refugee, and ideas for teaching people about the crisis and refugees. <http://www.iwpr.net>
- ▶ Center for Applied Linguistics/Refugee Service Center provides information on refugees and cultural orientation and has links to voluntary agencies and other groups serving refugees. <http://www.cal.org>

Language and Teaching Web Sites

- ▶ Albanian language, vocabulary and dictionaries: <http://www.albania.co.uk>
<http://www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/rbeard>
<http://www.languages-on-the-web.com/links/link-albanian.htm>
<http://www.call.gov/resource/language/alblr000.htm>
- ▶ Homework Central features Kosova in May 1999 with a range of information related to the conflict, culture, history, language, religion, etc. <http://www.homeworkcentral.com/top8/spotlight/kosovo>
- ▶ Albanian Home Page provides a broad range of information about Albanian people, history, culture, language with maps and a virtual tour of beautiful sites. <http://albanian.com/main>
- ▶ Global Information Networks in Education (GINIE) offers information on education under emergency situations, peace and reconciliation, and "ReliefWeb." See the great links to "hot" refugee issues. <http://ginie.sched.pitt.edu>
- ▶ The Spring Institute for International Studies provides ELT technical assistance to refugee programs. See the great materials related to ESL programs, teaching and mental health. <http://www.springinstitute.com>