

'We found freedom and democracy'

Refugee family embraces life in a new country

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Three years ago the Pilanas lived with the constant fear of death as bombs were dropped all around them in wartorn Kosovo.

Today the family of five live in a quiet neighbourhood in Edmonton's west end. It's the simple things that make them grateful—the things many Edmontonians take for granted.

"There's no discrimination here," says Shukrije Pilana. "Nobody questions why you came here, where you came from, what's your religion. Here we found freedom and democracy."

As ethnic Albanians, Shukrije, her husband Rexhep and their three children faced daily persecution in Kosovo. The family was among the 5,000 refugees who were part of Canada's mercy airlift from the Balkans in May 1999. In the months before the airlift, Kosovars had been forced to leave their homes by their own government, led by Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic. Armed Serb vigilantes and soldiers attacked Albanians, burning their homes and forc-



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The Pilana family, from left: 11, Shukrije, Kushtrim, 16, Rexhep and Jehona, 19, miss their homeland, but appreciate Canada.

ing many to flee to neighbouring Macedonia.

In March 1999, after international pressure had failed to dissuade Milosevic from his policy of ethnic cleansing, NATO launched air strikes against the Yugoslav armed forces.

For 10 days, as NATO bombs exploded around them, the Pilanas hid in their apartment in Pristina, the Kosovo capital.

They heard about trains taking people to the border of Macedonia, so in the early hours of the morning they made their escape. Aside from a bag of food, they weren't able to take anything—no passports, no clothing, no pictures. They didn't know how long they were going to be away, but thought they would

eventually return. They spent six weeks in a Macedonian refugee camp, an experience they don't like to talk about.

"It's like a bad dream," says 19-year-old Jehona.

A happier memory is the enthusiastic welcome that greeted them as they got off the plane in Halifax. Dozens of people cheered and handed out teddy bears and Canadian flags.

"I thought, 'What are these people doing for us? They don't even know us,'" Jehona says.

After living at a military base in New Brunswick for a few months, the Pilanas decided on Edmonton as their new home.

They settled into a townhouse in the west end, but those first months were diffi-

cult. They felt homesick. No one in the family spoke English.

Their place is small, but cosy. In one corner of the living room hangs an Albanian flag surrounded by several smaller Canadian flags, a symbol of their long journey. They fill their lives with art and beauty. Rexhep is a self-taught painter and several of his oil paintings hang in the living room. Shukrije writes poetry.

All five Pilanas are students. Shukrije and Rexhep are polishing their English and getting ready for studies at NorQuest College, Jehona is starting NAIT in the fall, 16-year-old Kushtrim is in Grade 10, and 11-year-old Iliriana is in Grade 6.

They are adjusting to life in Canada, but desperately miss friends and family in Kosovo.

"If you live 40 years somewhere and suddenly you leave you cannot forget and turn your back on the past," says Rexhep. "Family, friends, culture, values, you can not forget these things."

They plan to visit their homeland some day, but believe their future is here. The Pilanas, who had a choice of several countries, don't regret picking Canada.

"I would never trade Canada with any country in the world," Shukrije says. "Canada wouldn't have any meaning without friends. The people here opened their hearts and homes to us."