

Sweet taste of freedom

Citizens relish new role as Canadians

Stories by AJAY BHARDWAJ
Staff Writer

Haqif Shkodra left behind his possessions and his business and walked along a narrow road beside minefields as he fled his Kosovo home.

Months later, with just the clothes on his back and his wife and two children in tow, Shkodra reached Canada. He settled in Edmonton in November 1999.

Yesterday, the Shkodra family took the oath of citizenship and became Canadians.

"I was so happy when I came here," said Shkodra, 39, his eyes welling with tears.

"I will never, never forget my sponsors. It's difficult to live here when you come from war and you don't understand anything English. They helped us so much."

It was March 1999, when Serbian police and military officers told Shkodra, a restaurateur, he had 10 minutes to leave his life behind.

"We didn't have time to pick up anything, no clothes, no nothing," he said. "You just run. It's very difficult to leave your country. I was scared they were going to shoot me."

Shkodra, his wife Lirje and their children — son Rinor, 9, and daughter Rina, 7—walked between 40 and 50 km a day past minefields to reach a refugee camp in Macedonia.

That's where they learned about Canada.

"I had never heard about Canada, but many people said to me, 'You're lucky you're going to Canada, because Canada is a free country and everything you want you can have.'"

The family was sponsored by the Southminster-Steinhauer Church in Edmonton.

"It meant so much to him," said Barbara Hurrell of the church. "He's talked about it for a long time, getting his citizenship."

Shkodra now works at an IGA store, and is taking English courses at Norquest College. The couple has had a third child since fleeing Kosovo — a boy named Rilind, now aged two.

Some 53 people from 28 countries took the oath of citizenship yesterday during the Heritage Festival.

The new citizens, each carrying miniature Canadian flags, were piped into the ceremony by an RCMP bagpiper and led by an officer in red serge. They were followed by the Knights of Columbus.

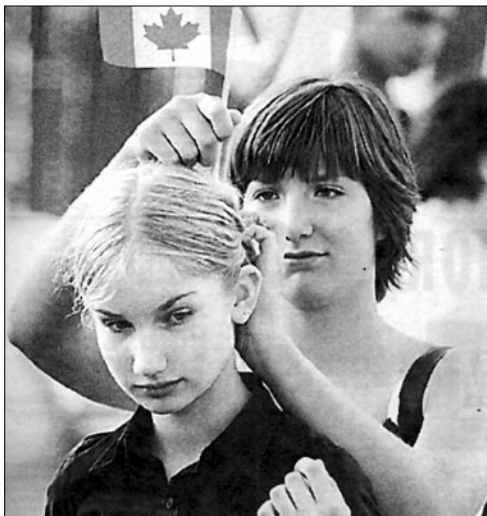
Proud family members and friends snapped pictures and took videos of the group as they marched in.

"We're here to welcome them to the Canadian family," said citizenship court Judge Gurcharan Singh Bhatia.

Bhatia, himself a former Indian citizen, said he arrived in Canada 38 years ago.

"I can tell you today from my experience ... that Canada is the most beautiful and best country in the world," he said to resounding applause.

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- PERRY MAH, SUN PHOTOS

Nectarios Chroniaris, 3, sits on mom Stella's lap and waves a Canadian Flag, while Paulina Stroemich, inset, places a flag in Anna Stroemich's hair during citizen court at the mainstage of the heritage amphitheatre in Hawrelak Park yesterday.