

From Roma refugee to attorney in Germany: Nizaqete Bislimi's *Durch die Wand* ("Through the Wall")

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In her book *Durch die Wand* ("Through the Wall"), Roma author Nizaqete Bislimi describes her difficult flight from Kosovo, the hardship and insecurity of life as a refugee in Germany, the harassment by authorities and the readiness to help of private volunteers and initiatives. Despite numerous obstacles, Bislimi, now 36, successfully completed school, studied law and now works as an attorney in Essen, Germany specializing in immigration law.

For the past two years, Bislimi has served as chair of the Federal Association of Roma. In light of the continuous attacks on refugees and the right to asylum, her book is highly relevant.

Nizaqete was 14 years old when she fled the village of Hallaç i Vogël in the south of Pristina, Kosovo with her mother, two sisters and two brothers in 1993. Her father's family had lived there for several generations. She left behind the safety and security of a large family with its own house and garden where she spent a happy childhood.

They left because of the "increasingly heated tensions between the Albanian and the Serbian population in Kosovo." Bislimi writes, "We fled from the spectre of a looming war which, though we could not exactly imagine it, we knew would affect us first."

Her father could not accompany the family. He had just been drafted into the Serbian army and was forced to surrender his papers.

Bislimi describes in detail her experiences with the German authorities: the endless waiting in offices, the constant fear of rejection and deportation, the inhumane housing conditions and the bureaucratic and financial hurdles that stood in the way of her education.

She writes about the sentiments behind the slogan "the boat is full," which characterized the official debates on the right to asylum in Germany in 1993 and, in the same year, led to a drastic tightening of asylum laws. Relatives advised the family not to apply for asylum as Roma or Ashkali (another ethnic cultural minority in Albania). They only

stood a chance if they identified themselves as Albanians fleeing from Serb violence.

At first, the six-person family was housed in a cramped cabin without locks on a ship in the mouth of the Rhine. To secure the door at night, they pushed one of their bunks in front of it before going to sleep.

Food rationing presented another problem. "One of the first difficult experiences for us was the unusual German food," writes Bislimi. "The pre-cooked food was delivered and handed out in metal containers and almost all of it hurt our stomachs and made us sick."

The asylum process was an inhumane procedure. Again and again, Bislimi's mother and all her children boarded the morning bus to their local branch of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees where they spent the entire day waiting on cold chairs to be interrogated, have their fingerprints taken and have their applications processed.

"At the agency, there was no room set aside for children and we couldn't go outside to play. There was nothing left for us to do but sit there and watch the clock while its hands went in circles. It was a scenario that would be repeated again and again for the next fourteen years of my life: waiting for someone to make a decision about my life without the possibility of influencing him or her myself."

The Bislimi family's next accommodations were former army barracks where entire families were assigned to one room. Despite the difficult conditions, friendships were forged. Families helped each other as much as they could.

Eventually, the family moved into refugee housing on the outskirts of Oberhausen in the Ruhr area in western Germany. They lived for months in this shanty town in a room no bigger than two by four meters, equipped with three sets of bunk beds, metal lockers and a small table with two chairs. Six single men lived in the room across from them. The few showers and toilets were run down and no amount of cleaning would solve the problem of burnt-on or dried dirt, mold and cockroaches.

After the initial shock, the Bislimis tried to make the best of their situation. During the day, they dismantled the bed frames and combined the mattresses to make seating areas. A curtain on the door protected them from all too prying eyes. With the junk on hand and gifts from fellow housemates, their room was somehow made livable.

Three months after submitting their asylum application, the family was notified that they were temporarily approved and would not be deported, but would still be obliged to leave the country. Bislimi writes: "This document meant that on any day we could be deported without warning. Our resident status in Germany was also highly uncertain and every evening before going to sleep we asked ourselves if this would be our last night."

These uncertain conditions would continue for 13 years.

Nizaqete and her sister, who had been good students in Kosovo, were sent to secondary school in Oberhausen. Thanks to their own efforts and the energetic help of supporters who looked after refugees in the barracks, they finally succeeded in overcoming all the obstacles that lay before them.

In the summer of 1994, her living situation also improved. A separate housing unit of 24 square meters, with its own bath and kitchen, in a container village near the noisy A3 highway was now considered "lovely." At a welcoming party in the new accommodations, Nizaqete met a German couple who would be an indispensable help to her in the coming years of harassment from immigration authorities and in her fight for a secure resident status.

As she dealt with the constant threat of deportation, Nizaqete decided she wanted to become an attorney. Almost insurmountable obstacles were placed in her way.

A Unicef study from 2010 is cited in the book, which indicates that access to education and social participation for the children of refugee families in Germany is severely limited. For decades, children of Roma and Sinti families were almost automatically referred to special education schools. In eight out of 16 German states at the beginning of 2005, compulsory education did not apply to children who were the subject of asylum proceedings or who had been authorized to live in Germany. Only in 2010 did schooling become obligatory for them in all of Germany.

Adding to their problems in Germany and their fears of deportation, Bislimi's family worried about their father and other relatives in Kosovo. Her mother, most of all, lived in constant fear. "Refugee policy in Germany makes people sick in body and soul," writes Bislimi. "I once heard the expression 'death on the installment plan' and found it very fitting."

The family had to extend their short-term permits in a nerve-racking procedure every three months, sometimes

every month. Vocational counsellors and public officials told Nizaqete that according to her permit, she could neither train nor study. She should just marry. There was no other chance for her. Finally, she simply enrolled at the Ruhr University in Bochum and completed her studies successfully. However, she did not receive support under the Federal Training Assistance Act or any other state funding. She paid for her studies with part-time jobs.

Following the successful completion of her first state examinations, Bislimi began work as a junior lawyer in the Higher Regional Court in Hamm. After 13 years, immigration authorities finally granted her a residence permit in June 2006.

Bislimi's book is also critical of Nato's military interventions in Kosovo, in which Germany also took part. Nato air strikes on Serbian positions in Kosovo triggered the humanitarian catastrophe, she writes. And after the war, when Kosovo was effectively partitioned off from Serbia, the problems facing ethnic minorities increased. "We heard terrifying stories from home. There was talk of pogroms that took place before the eyes of Nato soldiers, and talk of rapes and forced evictions." Many of Bislimi's relatives were killed.

In the last chapter of her book, Bislimi describes how Germany and the European Union pressure the Balkan states to take in refugees. Countries like Serbia, Macedonia and other states would only be granted visa facilitation if they would commit to repatriation agreements.

The living conditions of Roma are devastating. Close to a third of the 600 Roma settlements in Serbia have no water supply and 70 percent are not connected to a sewage system. The infant mortality rate among the Roma is four times higher than the national average. The average life expectancy of Roma women is 48 years.

Bislimi's *Durch die Wand* provides numerous facts about the brutality of German asylum and immigration policies that have recently shown their ugly face again. With the tightening of asylum laws and the classification of Kosovo as a "secure third country," people like Bislimi will no longer have the chance to stay in Germany.

The account of her family's painful experiences is moving. It deserves a large readership.



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