

REFUGEES

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The Town That

LOVES Refugees





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Pizzas, dogs and life insurance... Starting a new life

For 62-year-old Gedeon Gakindi, the experience of Australian police officers handing him a pizza and soft drinks was a defining moment in his life. Gedeon survived Rwanda's genocide in the early 1990s when he learned to fear that any uniform represented repression and possible murder.

As a refugee he eventually resettled with his family in Australia and at one local social event he came face to face again with uniforms and authority. But this time the context was totally different.

"When I saw police officers serving those pizzas to ordinary people, I was amazed," he recalls now. "I have never been served pizza by a police officer before. It was an emotional healing" of his earlier traumatic history in central Africa.

Hagir Eltayeb remembers

having a pet dog as a youngster in her family home in Sudan before being forced to flee that country's upheavals after her husband had been tortured and imprisoned.

When they, too, ended up in

Kenya as one of the by now famous "Lost Boys of Sudan" – another victim of war. He was resettled in Canada six years ago and one thing he is still amazed by is that at his workplace he has a life insurance plan.

"In Africa you live day by day," he said, as part of a chaotic environment where you might be dead by tomorrow. "But over here, I am 100 percent sure that I will be alive tomorrow and I am planning for things that are 25 years from now."

When seven members of a family of Somali Bantu refugees were flying to a new life in the United States,

other passengers on their flight spontaneously organized a collection. Sick bags were turned into 'collection plates' and the amazed family was presented with \$830 and 15 euros.

It is those little things and very personal anecdotes which often define a magical turning point when refugees who may



UNHCR/V. WINTER/USA/2005

Australia, one of the first things they did to stabilize their lives was to adopt a dog which they named Lucky and introduced it to their three children. Now they "are all very happy."

William Kolong Pioth spent years roaming the savannah grasslands of Sudan and in refugee camps in neighboring

High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers

High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers announced in late February that he had submitted his resignation to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Lubbers, a long serving former Dutch prime minister, who had taken office as High Commissioner four years earlier, stepped down in the wake of a disputed sex allegation.

In a message to an estimated 6,300 staff members working in 115 countries, Lubbers said:

"The opportunity to serve as High Commissioner for Refugees was a genuine honor for me and for more than four years I devoted all of my energy to the organization and the people of concern to the Office. This will remain for me one of the most compelling and rewarding periods of my professional career.

"Most of all, I am tremendously proud of you, UNHCR staff, and everything you have achieved

while I had the privilege of leading the organization.

"My decision to resign has much to do with my wish not to complicate life for the Secretary-General, who is facing a series of problems and ongoing pressure from the media. I have every confidence that UNHCR will continue to be a vital, imaginative and effective humanitarian organization."

During his time in office, the

have spent years or even decades in flight and in refugee camps suddenly realize that a new and better life has just begun.

The majority of refugees pick up the interrupted threads of their lives by eventually returning to their own countries, towns and villages.

Some, often the most vulnerable civilians, cannot go back and like the refugees mentioned in this piece, begin their lives afresh in several countries around the world which offer them permanent resettlement.

These places are highly prized. Last year, fewer than 100,000 persons out of a population of more than 17 million 'of concern' to UNHCR were allocated places.

This current issue tells the story of just one small American city which has warmly welcomed refugees for several decades. In return, civic, business and political leaders in Utica in upstate New York credit these newcomers with reviving the fortunes of the entire city.

It is a remarkable story, but the legacy of Utica stretches to every corner of the globe where there are refugees and where there are communities prepared to welcome them—that together they can form a very successful partnership.

After the tsunami, what next?

It was the mother of all natural disasters.

The end-of-year tsunami which devastated countries around Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean and spread as far as Africa, killed an estimated 200,000 people. Millions were made homeless and the economic damage amounted to untold billions of dollars.

UNHCR's refugee mandate normally does not cover such a scenario, but such was the havoc wreaked and the need for immediate assistance that it joined U.N. agencies and other organizations and launched its first ever operation for a natural disaster.

The day after the tsunami struck, the agency threw open its warehouses in Sri Lanka, one of the main epicenters of destruction, and distributed everything on hand—plastic sheeting, cooking sets and clothing for 100,000 people.

The agency's country-wide network of offices was particularly well placed to offer instant help in Sri Lanka where, for nearly 20 years, it has assisted many of the more than one million people uprooted from their homes by civil strife.

Other programs were put into place in Indonesia and Somalia on the east coast of Africa.

After the initial emergency phase of the rescue effort, UNHCR announced a six-month, \$75 million appeal to fund its part of the ongoing U.N. disaster program, concentrating on providing shelter, blankets, cooking kits and jerry cans, logistics and transportation.

There were, however, widespread misgivings within the humanitarian community that the global response to the tsunami had been so generous and overwhelming that help for other older, less glamorous humanitarian projects could suffer from donor fatigue backlash in coming months.

"I want to stress that even as we made available our emergency resources for an immediate

response, we have ensured that this is not done at the expense of UNHCR's capacity to respond to refugee emergencies elsewhere in the world," Janet Lim, the agency's Director for Asia and the Pacific, said.

"We would also like to urge member states who are our traditional donors to ensure that their generous response to the disaster will not be at the expense of refugees all over the world who need care and protection," she added.



2001-2005



global number of people 'of concern' to the refugee agency dropped from 21.8 million people in 2001 to 17.1 million people at the start of 2004—a fall of nearly 22 percent.

These figures included more than 3.5 million Afghans who returned home with agency help since 2002.

In addition, the number of people seeking asylum in industrialized countries dropped

to its lowest level in 16 years, due in part to Lubbers' attempts to focus international attention and resources on poor countries which host most of the world's refugees.

The High Commissioner also stabilized the agency's funding, tightened accountability and streamlined the organization's emergency response capacity.

The United States at the time of his departure ranked UNHCR

number 1 among all U.N. agencies funded through the State Department.

At an emotional farewell, Deputy High Commissioner Wendy Chamberlin, who took over temporary leadership of the agency, presented Lubbers with the first annual UNHCR Achievement Award, citing his individual and professional contributions to refugees worldwide.



A marriage'm

A SMALL AMERICAN TOWN, ASIAN FREEDOM FIGHTERS, S

Hassan Murithi
and members
of his Somali Bantu
family



made in heaven'

OMALI 'SLAVES' AND SURVIVORS OF THE 'KILLING FIELDS'

TEXTS

BY RAY WILKINSON

PHOTOGRAPHS

BY VINCENT WINTER



“Would the last person to leave
Utica please turn out the lights.”





ONCE UPON A TIME it was a jewel in America's burgeoning industrial empire. The town rocked to the reverberations of the country's two largest textile mills at a time when cotton was king. The Erie Canal, one of

America's most important and grandiose engineering projects, was built through the local business district, linking the continent's internal Great Lakes region to its eastern seaboard and the outside world.

Politicians, Mafia godfathers and renowned celebrities came a calling. Charles Dickens and Teddy Roosevelt were visitors. It was a hideaway for the crime czars of New York City who stashed their 'molls' or girlfriends here and it was not uncommon to read of gangland warfare on the streets.

Shows direct from Broadway were staged, three glitzy arts centers and theaters were built and the town's colorful history earned it the sobriquet of 'sin city.'

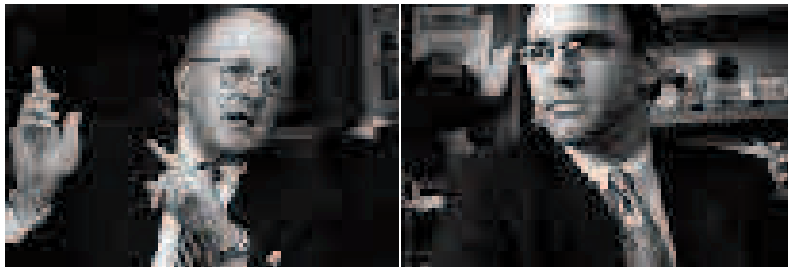
A nearby air force base, part of America's strategic air defense network, added a touch of gravitas.

But when America's textile industry declined and the once bustling region became part of an emerging 'rust belt', as demographics began to change and families and jobs migrated to southern states, the town of Utica fell on hard times.

Factories closed and then crumbled. In just a few short decades, the population fell from around 120,000 to 65,000 today.

Utica: Reminders of past opulence and engineering feats such as the Erie Canal.





U.S. Congressman Sherwood Boehlert and Mayor Tim Julian (right).

Like other centers in America's northeast corner, Utica faced irreversible decline. Things became so bad that bumper stickers proclaimed: "Would the last person to leave Utica please turn out the lights."

HELP IS ON THE WAY

UTICA HAS ALWAYS BEEN A TOWN of immigrants.

Germans, Poles, Italians and Arabs helped to make it prosperous in the first place. Now, another wave of newcomers—from Viet Nam, from Myanmar, from the former Soviet Union, Europe and Africa—are helping to rescue it from its economic stagnation.

Unlike those earlier immigrants, this latest group are refugees, selected from some of the world's most vulnerable groups to begin their lives afresh in the United States.

Many refugee groups have, of course, set up home in other parts of the country, but Utica is unusual for several reasons:

The town's size has stabilized at around 65,000 and 10,000 of these residents—nearly one in six—are refugees. That is a massive concentration of uprooted peoples from all corners of the globe transplanted to one small place.

Their numbers are not only impressive, but also their diversity. They come from around 30 countries

“The town had been hemorrhaging for years. The arrival of so many refugees has put a tourniquet around that hemorrhaging.”



and vastly different backgrounds—Synath Buth and his wife survived Cambodia’s ‘killing fields’ and say that the Hollywood movie of that name actually underplayed the savage butchery of an era when virtually an entire population was uprooted and murdered; Pavel Brutsky served in one of the Soviet Union’s most secret military units and then survived years of religious persecution; Loi Hoang, a boat person from Viet Nam and Hassan Murithi who had been a virtual slave in the failed state of Somalia on the Horn of Africa.

National, city and refugee officials, industry leaders and the refugees themselves are in no doubt that the arrival of this polyglot community has been key in turning the town’s fortunes around.

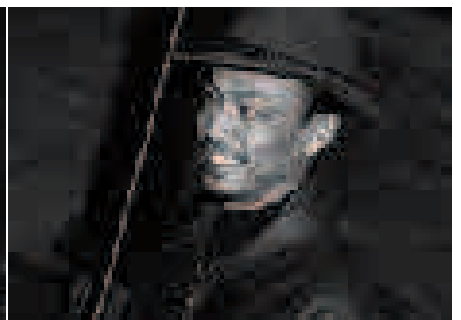
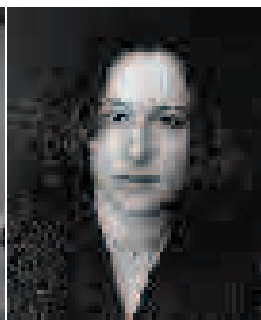
“Utica loves refugees,” Gene Dewey, the Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration in Washington, told a Senate hearing last year. “Utica has benefited from refugees. The town was going downhill, but it is now reviving because of refugees.”

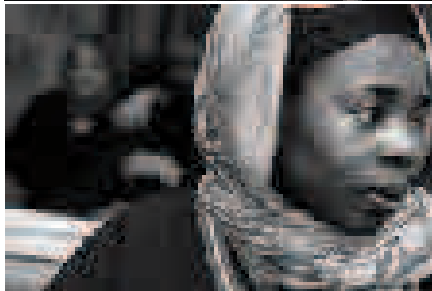
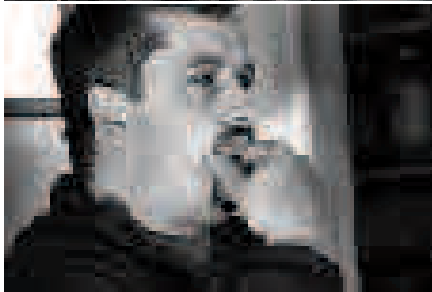
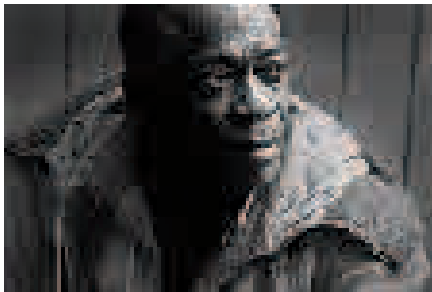
Republican Mayor Tim Julian agrees. He told REFUGEES in a recent interview: “The town had been hemorrhaging for years. The arrival of so many refugees has put a tourniquet around that hemorrhaging. They have saved entire neighborhoods which were ready for the wrecking ball. As a city, we can’t put a price on this.”

At the same meeting, local U.S. Congressman Sher-

Utica: Faded glories.

Staff of the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees.





The town's size has stabilized at around 65,000 — 10,000 of whom are refugees. They're from nearly 30 countries and vastly different backgrounds.

Suburban Utica and refugee faces.

wood Boehlert said, “We welcome them with open arms. This is the turnaround stage for Utica. The community has now not only stabilized but is looking to the future with much more optimism than many other centers in the northeast. It’s all coming together.”

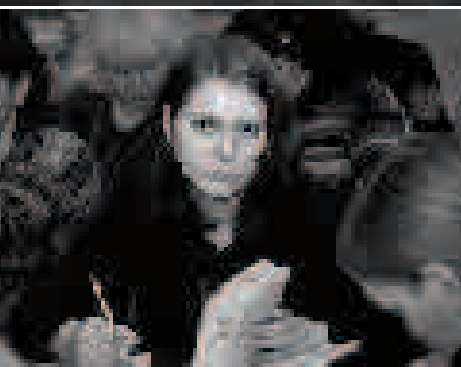
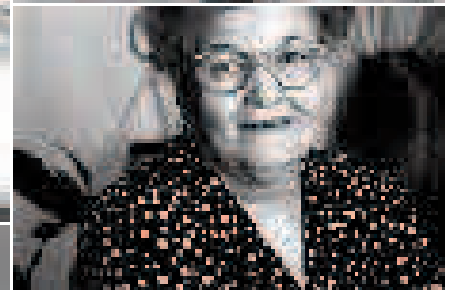
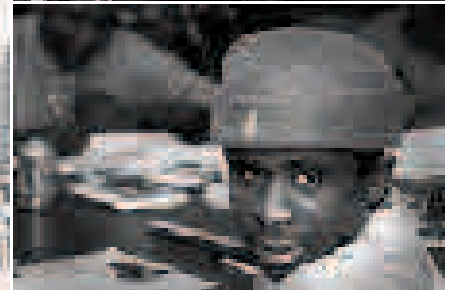
RENEWAL

PHYSICALLY, UTICA WEARS THE FACE of a town with a distinctly chequered history, a shadow of its former racy self, but trying bravely to apply some new makeup.

Once mighty textile mills lie abandoned. Downtown Utica has a forlorn and weary look, especially in the

depths of winter when vicious winds howl through empty lots, whipping up snow drifts many feet deep and temperatures plunge to unimaginable depths. Some residential districts became so dangerous during the town’s decline that the national guard was called out to demolish unstable structures.

But the Utica Hotel has undergone a multi-million dollar facelift and an unsuspecting visitor can only gasp at the totally unexpected sight of glittering chandeliers and tastefully renovated interiors in its cavernous foyer. The baroque style Stanley Theater is open for business. More millions have been ploughed into a new insurance center. Nearby, stately homes are testament to the



town's former glory days.

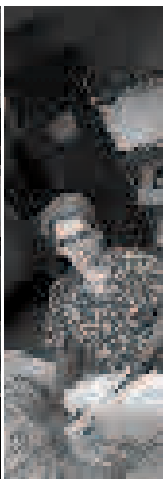
Some of the mills have been saved and converted into apartments. Refugees, especially from the Bosnian community, have purchased cheap properties which had been abandoned before their arrival and they have now renovated entire neighborhoods.

There are Vietnamese restaurants, Russian neighborhood stores, Bosnian hairdressing salons and coffee shops, a large Pentecostal church built by refugees from the former Soviet Union, mosques and temples. Thirty-one languages are spoken in city schools. The local newspaper runs a weekly column in Bosnian. A hospital has a website devoted to cultural diversity.

All are testimony not only to the new economic vigor of the place, but of the increased cultural and religious diversity which has accompanied the refugees.

In Veldin's barber shop, 60-year-old Juso Miykovic who fled the Balkan wars in the 1990s, finishes with a customer and begins a lively discussion with a local architect who is designing an enlarged salon for him across the road. On the wall, a newspaper clipping announces, "East Utica is a haven for Bosnians." Yes, says Juso "Life and business is very good here."

Close by, Dzevsza Dizdarevic named his grocery store and tiny coffee shop after his daughter, Amy, when he opened a couple of years ago. He sells Bosnian



specialties, meats and chocolates. Clients smoke endlessly and drink small, strong cups of coffee as they did during the fighting back home in the 1990s. “High taxes are killing businesses,” the owner grumbles and then adds “but for us Utica has been good.”

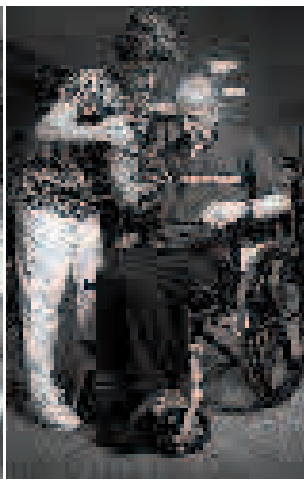
WIN-WIN SITUATION

ON THE EDGE OF TOWN is the recently renovated factory of one of the region’s major employers, ConMed, maker of precision surgical equipment. The building was originally owned by General Electric, but as the city fell into decline GE, one of America’s mightiest

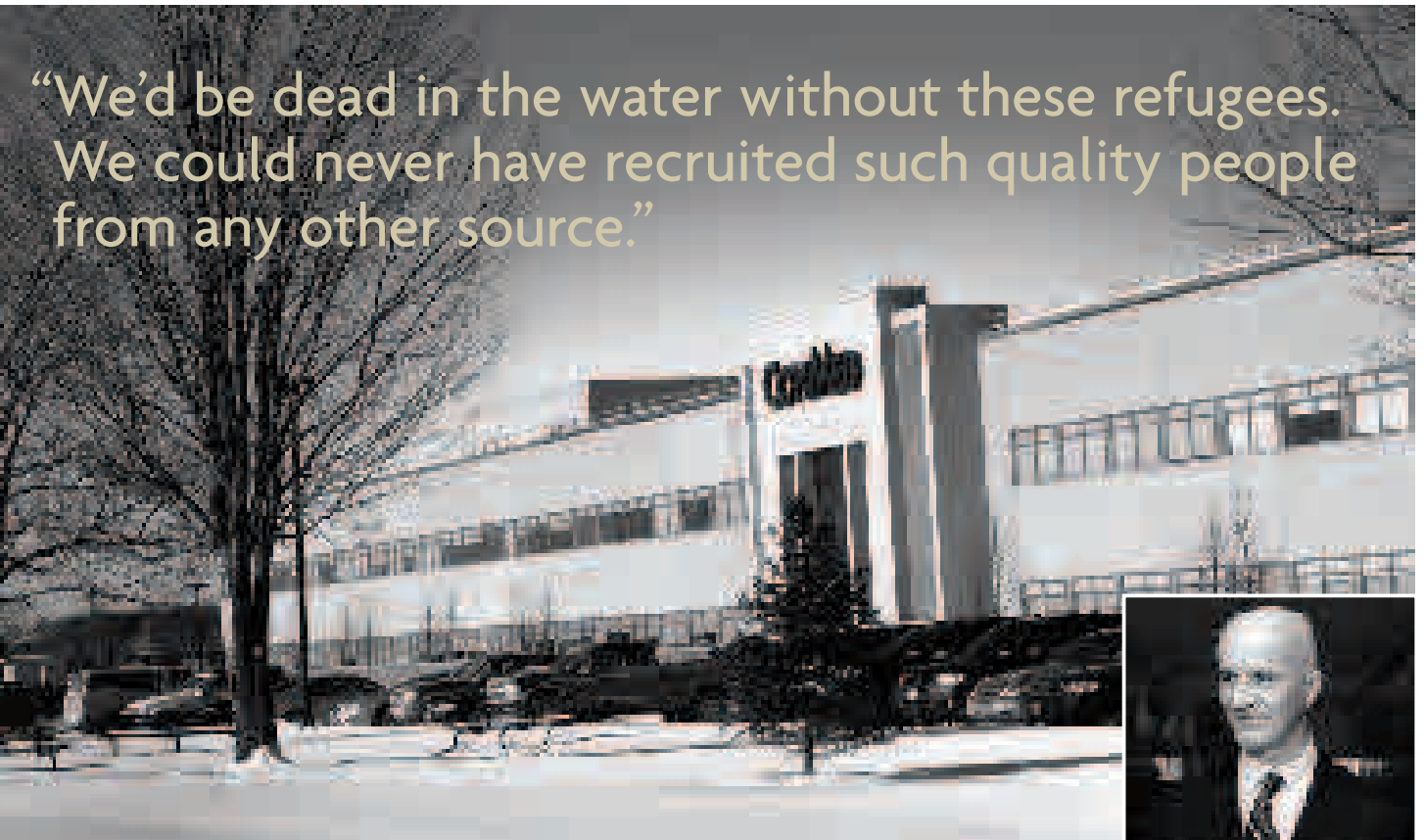
conglomerates, closed its doors.

ConMed these days is looking for all the workers it can get. “We have hired 16 people in the last six working days,” Bob O’Reilly, the director of ConMed’s human resources department said one day recently. “We have 111 openings.” The company employs around 1,300 people in three plants, approximately half of them refugees from all over—Bosnians, Vietnamese, Burmese.

Some of the jobs are distinctly low-tech, such as basic assembly line work, but refugees are also production planners, international sales representatives and administrative employees. Three and four members of some families work at the plant.



“We’d be dead in the water without these refugees. We could never have recruited such quality people from any other source.”



“This is a win-win situation,” Bob O’Reilly said. “It’s good for the refugees and it’s good for us. In fact, the company probably would not be here without these refugees.”

Across Utica, around 50 refugees are employed at the Presbyterian Home which cares for the aged. They work in the kitchens, the laundry and as nursing aides. “What I hear constantly from both patients and their families is the degree of warmth and the ‘connection’ shown by our refugee helpers with their patients,” says director of human resources Mary Austin Pratt.

Administrator Tony Joseph is equally emphatic. “We’d be dead in the water without these refugees. It was a marriage made in heaven. We could never have recruited such quality people from any other source.”

This ‘marriage made in heaven’ has been the result of a particular set of positive circumstances.

As a community with strong immigrant roots, Utica finds it easy to welcome other newcomers, despite predictable grumblings from some residents who complain about the mythical advantages and benefits the refugees reputedly enjoy.

For nearly 25 years a vibrant group called the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees has overseen the arrival of the newcomers, arranging accommodation, jobs, schools, language training and citizenship lessons—a veritable independent life-support system.

Schools, hospitals and clinics, housing authorities and other vital groups have had to adapt to accommodate the refugees.

As the town’s economic decline bottomed out, many jobs on offer, though not high tech, had the advantage of allowing people who often did not speak English or

Refugees at work. The ConMed plant and human resources director Bob O’Reilly.



“There is still room here for more refugees.”

Learning English at the Utica Resource Center.

have the skills needed in a highly industrialized society, to immediately find employment and begin building a new life.

Equally and perhaps ironically, a depressed housing market caused by the economic decline, was a vital factor in helping the refugees establish themselves. Apartments were available and cheap to rent or buy. Three, four and five bedroom homes which many local families had moved out of were snapped up for a few thousand dollars and vigorously renovated by their new owners. There were few other places in America where such bargains could be found.

“All of these factors have been critical in being able to integrate so many refugees so successfully and so quickly into the local community,” said Peter D. Vogelaar, the Executive Director of the Refugee Resource Center.

WHERE AM I?

BUT HOW EXACTLY DID free-

dom fighters from Myanmar, prisoners of war from Bosnia or political refugees from Iraq end up in an obscure town in upstate New York that few of them had ever heard of before they arrived?

The United States is among only a handful of countries (others include Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Scandinavian states, the Netherlands, Ireland and the United Kingdom), working closely with UNHCR which officially accept quotas of refugees for permanent resettlement. These places are highly prized. Last year, less than 100,000 were resettled from an overall global population of 17 million which the refugee agency cares for.

Each year the federal government in Washington establishes America's quota, vets the prospective immigrants and then, in coordination with state, city, church and domestic refugee and humanitarian agencies, decides which communities can and are willing to accept arrivals.

Utica's involvement began in 1975 when a group of clergy decided among themselves to help resettle refugees. Their first project was modest, helping a lone Vietnamese man to escape the aftermath of the wars in Indochina. Four years later, sponsored by the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, the current Refugee







Nezir Jasarevic,
wife Azira and
daughter Tina.
The war in
the Balkans (*right*)
in the early 1990s.

“I knew America by the movies, and Utica certainly wasn’t the movies.”

Resource Center was established.

The numbers of refugees began to increase. In one particularly noteworthy project in the early 1990s, hundreds of so-called Amerasian children, youngsters fathered by Americans during the Viet Nam war and then abandoned, were flown to Utica where they were introduced to American life, taught English and vocational skills before being integrated into local communities.

Today, the Refugee Resource Center, which is housed in an old Catholic school and with a staff of nearly 40, most of them refugees themselves, is one of the most lively and colorful institutions in town. The long corridors and classrooms are packed with swirls of color—a saffron clad monk, women draped in a kaleidoscope of vivid cotton hues from Somalia, lathesome young women from Eastern Europe in bright, skimpy tops, people bundled into bulbous down-filled topcoats against the biting cold—and a babble of languages from around the world.

English and vocational classes are in progress. People seek help to find a job, accommodation or a school for their children, an interpreter for a visit to the hospital or a lawyer or just the company of other refugees. There is advice available on obtaining American citizenship.

But this is a two-way street. The center is not only responsible for helping the refugees, but also in advising local institutions such as schools, hospitals and apartment owners in how best they can both understand and assist the often overwhelmed newcomers, “building bridges between the two groups,” as Peter Vogaar describes it.

WE GOTTA GET OUT OF HERE

NEZIR JASAREVIC HAD BEEN A PRISONER OF WAR during the Balkan conflict, had been pummeled by his guards, seen one of his fellow inmates beaten to death and had wandered aimlessly across battlefields as his weight shrunk from 100 to 61 kilos.



He eventually escaped the Balkan nightmare, but in some ways his arrival in the United States appeared at the time almost as traumatic as his wartime experiences.

“I knew America only by the movies and Utica certainly wasn’t the movies,” he recalls. “God, get me out of this place. I want to go back home,” was his first reaction to his new home.

He had thought he was moving to New York City, but when he arrived at the airport there his official greeter spoke only Russian, not Bosnian. Nezir did not speak any English.

At his next stop at Syracuse airport near Utica “A Vietnamese looking guy came up and grabbed my travel bag,” he said. “I had been instructed never to surrender my bag. We had a tug of war right there. We fought. Then another man came and spoke to me in Bosnian.”

If he had initially asked God to get him out of this place, now “I thanked God for this fellow Bosnian. Welcome to Utica.”

Kaw Soe also thought he was going to New York City when he arrived in 1999. A member of the persecuted Karen ethnic minority in Myanmar, he had been involved for years in what he calls the democracy and nationalist struggle against the military regime in Rangoon.

He also flew on to the Syracuse airport rather than staying in ‘The Big Apple’ and en route by



UNHCR / A. HOLLMANN / CS / HENX-1992



A family from Belarus. Prayer in the Pentecostal church.

road to Utica he noticed lots of deer bounding and leaping across the highway. "I thought to myself that maybe they had decided to move us to this place because with so much wildlife it might remind us more of the jungle we had left behind," he recalled recently, chuckling slowly to himself.

"Awful, awful," said 41-year-old Pavel Brutsky about

his own arrival in his newly adopted town. And he should know 'awful.'

Brutsky was born in Belarus in the former Soviet Union. Despite being persecuted because he was a member of the Pentecostal religious sect, he was nevertheless drafted into a top security military unit and sent to the Mongolian border where, throughout his tour, he

“When I first came here I wanted to escape as soon as possible. Now I love it. I really do love it.”



was never allowed off base, never allowed leave or the chance to meet girlfriends and subsisted on the equivalent of a few dollars a month in pay.

He tried for 12 years to escape the country and the persistent religious persecution and when he finally received official permission to emigrate he had to surrender his national passport and pay a fine.



UNHCR/B. PRESS/CS/KEN-2002

Life in a refugee camp in East Africa.

“We had to give up everything, but we didn’t mind where we ended up when we left,” he said, “Canada, Australia, the United States... Still, when we got to Utica, it was a big shock.”

Worse followed. Pavel saw his sister shot in the chest inside their rented house in what was then still a lawless part of Utica.

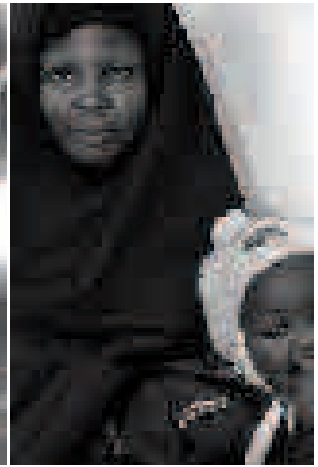
A group known as the Somali Bantu are among the latest refugee arrivals in Utica and many of them are still in some shock. Cultural differences between their homeland and the U.S. are among the most extreme any refugee group has experienced and so is the weather.

“I never, never thought the climate

On the Horn of Africa, summer temperatures routinely top 40 degrees centigrade. In Utica there are also often 40 degree readings—but this time it is 40 degrees below freezing during the harsh regional winters.

Hassan Murithi saw his wife raped in front of him by marauders when the state of Somalia imploded in the early 1990s. After that atrocity the couple, together with their eight children, walked for a week to reach Kenya and comparative safety. Some fellow Somali Bantu died along the way from thirst.

The Bantu had originally been enslaved by Arabs from southern Africa in the 1800s and were treated as virtu-



could be as bad as this.”

al serfs in Somalia until clan warfare destroyed that country. Like Hassan and his family, thousands of the Bantu fled to neighboring Kenya and after a fruitless search by UNHCR lasting for a decade to find them a new home, the United States finally agreed to relocate the bulk of them two years ago.

When REFUGEES wrote about their flight to a new world in 2002 (N° 128), it reported, “The Bantu now face a frightening cultural chasm. Most cannot read, write or speak English. They are sturdy farm workers with few other skills, who have never turned on an electric light switch, used a flush toilet, crossed a busy street,

ridden in a car or an elevator, seen snow or experienced air conditioning.”

Since their arrival in America, they have tackled all of those problems reasonably successfully, but in the depths of what is the first winter for some of them, it is still the weather that can be overwhelming. “I never, never thought the climate could be as bad as this,” Hassan Murithi said recently in his rented apartment as the central heating soared towards the height of an African summer’s day. He put the situation into context: “In Africa we had to pay a lot of money for ice. Here, it is everywhere,” pointing toward the snowbound streets.

The Somali Bantu come to grips with a freezing Utica winter.



Loi Hoang and his family. A long way from Viet Nam and the boat people.

“And it is free.” Accompanied by a hearty laugh.

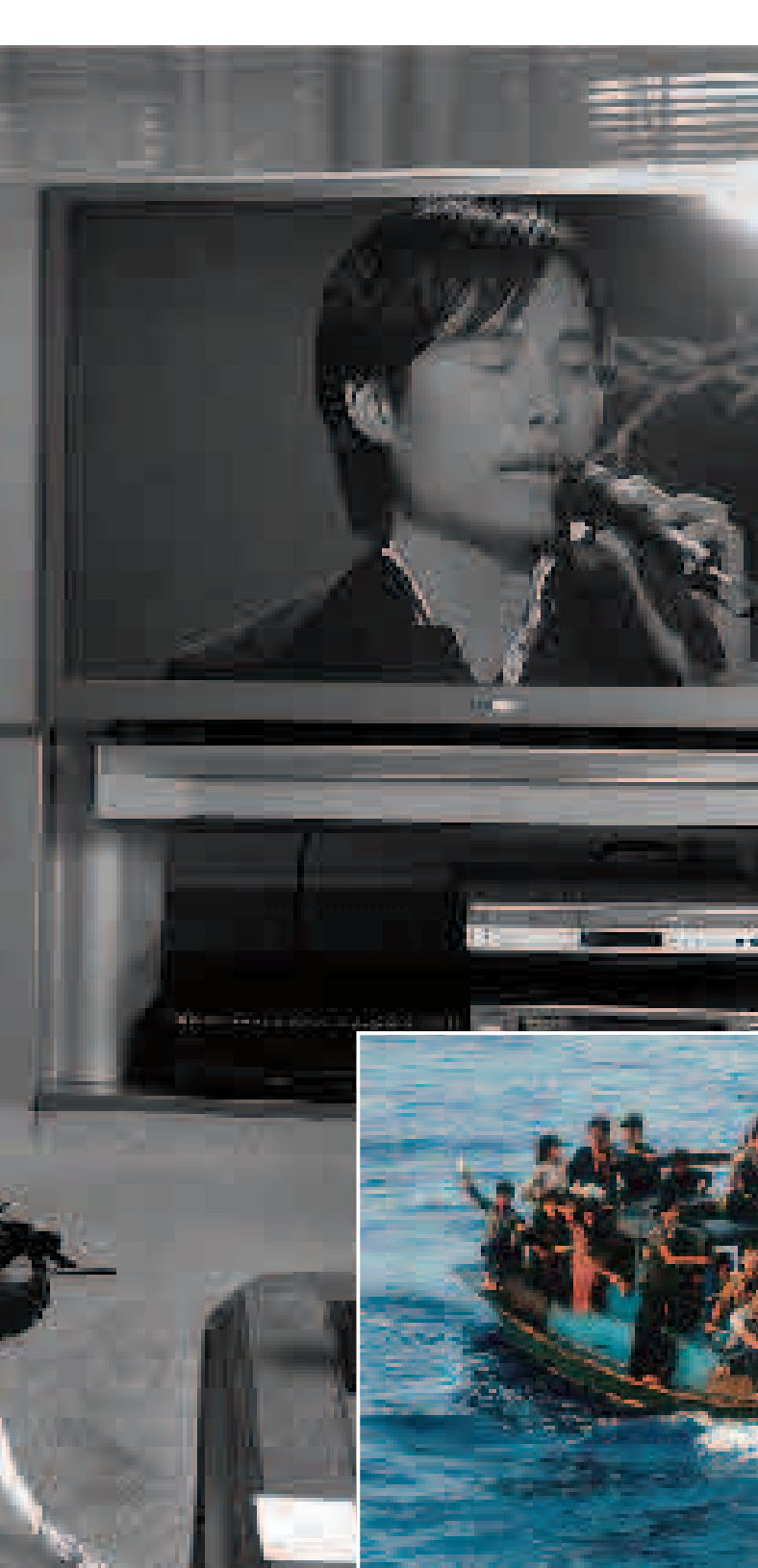
NO, LET’S STAY AWHILE

BUT IF ARRIVAL IN UTICA WAS DISORIENTING for virtually all of the refugees, another common thread has been the resilience and ability to adapt of both the newcomers and Utica itself.

Hassan Murithi’s oldest son Mohammed has a driv-

ing licence, a car and is studying medicine at a local community college. All of his other children speak English, attend school and talk of hamburgers, pizzas and the Simpsons television show. Hassan and his wife work full time.

The turning point for Nezir Jasarevic came when he attended local classes full of Vietnamese refugees. “They were in a totally alien environment,” he said, “and I realized that as a European I probably had a better



“I can’t leave here. I have so many friends.”

more than 2,000 refugees from the former Soviet Union.

“Look. Look,” he said to a visitor recently. “I grew this cabbage in my own garden. I love this garden. I love my house and my family being here.

“When I first came here I wanted to escape as soon as possible. Now I love it. I really do love it.” And he is undoubtedly sincere.

Loi Hoang, who escaped by boat from Viet Nam as a teenager, now works as a poker dealer at a nearby gambling complex run by the Oneida Indians. “I can’t leave here,” he says. “I have so many friends.” And then the inevitable quip about the weather. “I like everything here except the winters. But at least we don’t have flooding and earthquakes,” a



UNHCR/P. DELOCHE/CS/SOUTH CHINA SEA/1987

chance of making a success of it than they did. I began sleeping with my dictionary to learn English.” Today he is a successful health insurance marketing official with a pleasant suburban home on the outskirts of Utica.

Pavel moved out of the area where his sister was shot and along with his wife, Mira, and six children now lives in a ranch style home overlooking Utica and near to the Pentecostal church where his father-in-law is minister and which is a major pillar of support for the

reference to the recent tsunami disaster in Asia.

The town itself has had to be equally ready to accept change. Few school systems anywhere are called upon to teach children speaking nearly three dozen languages. Many new arrivals have to learn English from scratch.

Because of language, social and cultural differences, visits to the doctor can be fraught with difficulty for both medical staff and patients. Many refugees have es-



Coming to terms with a more sophisticated new world.

caped wars and persecution and need extra care for trauma related problems.

Property owners may welcome new clients, but they sometimes bring with them unwelcome habits, occasionally daubing walls with graffiti or doing the laundry in the middle of the living room floor.

Inevitably, some locals complain about the refugees receiving massive cash handouts, free apartments and easy jobs—grumbles heard wherever refugees resettle around the world, but all untrue.

What is true is the need for major financial and human resources, flexibility and patience from both sides to make an experiment like this work successfully.

WHAT NOW?

THE CONTINUING FLOW of resettlement refugees to Utica and other American communities depends on a series of factors—world events, federal policy, the ability of organizations such as the Mohawk Refugee Center to

handle new arrivals and the willingness of communities to absorb the strangers.

In the waning decades of the 20th century, the United States accepted successive waves of refugees from Viet Nam, the former Soviet Union and Bosnia. In some ways, those were relatively straightforward programs, generously funded, easy to accept politically and, since each of these large groups was ethnically homogenous, easier for host communities to absorb linguistically and culturally.

In those earlier times there were also many family reunifications—husbands joining wives and children joining parents—which again required modest human and financial resources.

Those 'simple' days have gone.

Refugees being accepted for resettlement today are often among the most genuinely vulnerable groups of the uprooted rather than simply being 'politically acceptable.' They are from smaller groups and from many more diverse countries.

There are Vietnamese restaurants, Russian neighborhood stores, Bosnian hairdressing salons and coffee shops, a large Pentecostal church built by refugees from the former Soviet Union, mosques and temples.



In humanitarian terms that may be a major step forward, but in an era of tighter funding, it can be a major headache for domestic refugee agencies and host communities. Instead of having to handle refugees from a single country with a reasonable grasp of western cultural values, they may now have to juggle with and devote more human and financial resources for greater periods of time to address the needs of several groups speaking different languages and having far different social norms.

Then there is the question of numbers. Before the terrorist attacks against New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, the United States allocated some 70,000 places annually for resettlement refugees. In 2000, the Mohawk resource center helped 744 refugees relocate to Utica.

Following the attacks, and as security concerns took precedence, the national figures dropped precipitously to only 26,300 in 2002. The Utica figures showed a corresponding fall to a mere 240 people that year. Refugee centers had to adjust their budgets and even reshape programs and overall objectives to remain relevant and

in business.

The overall number of entrants to the U.S. doubled last year, leaving refugee agencies in an unaccustomed dilemma. They warmly welcomed the turn around in refugee numbers, but then had to scramble for scarce resources to help a far more complex and larger flow of refugees.

In Utica, the very success of the refugee program created other headaches. In a more buoyant housing market, prices have risen, making it more difficult for newcomers to find suitable accommodation. There are now some soft patches in the job market. Financial resources are tight.

So has the town reached a saturation point for refugees?

Despite some concerns, the answer is emphatic. "No," said Mayor Tim Julian. "We look forward to welcoming more of them." "There is still room here for more refugees," said Congressman Sherwood Boehlert, a sentiment echoed by many local companies which attribute their survival to the refugees already here.

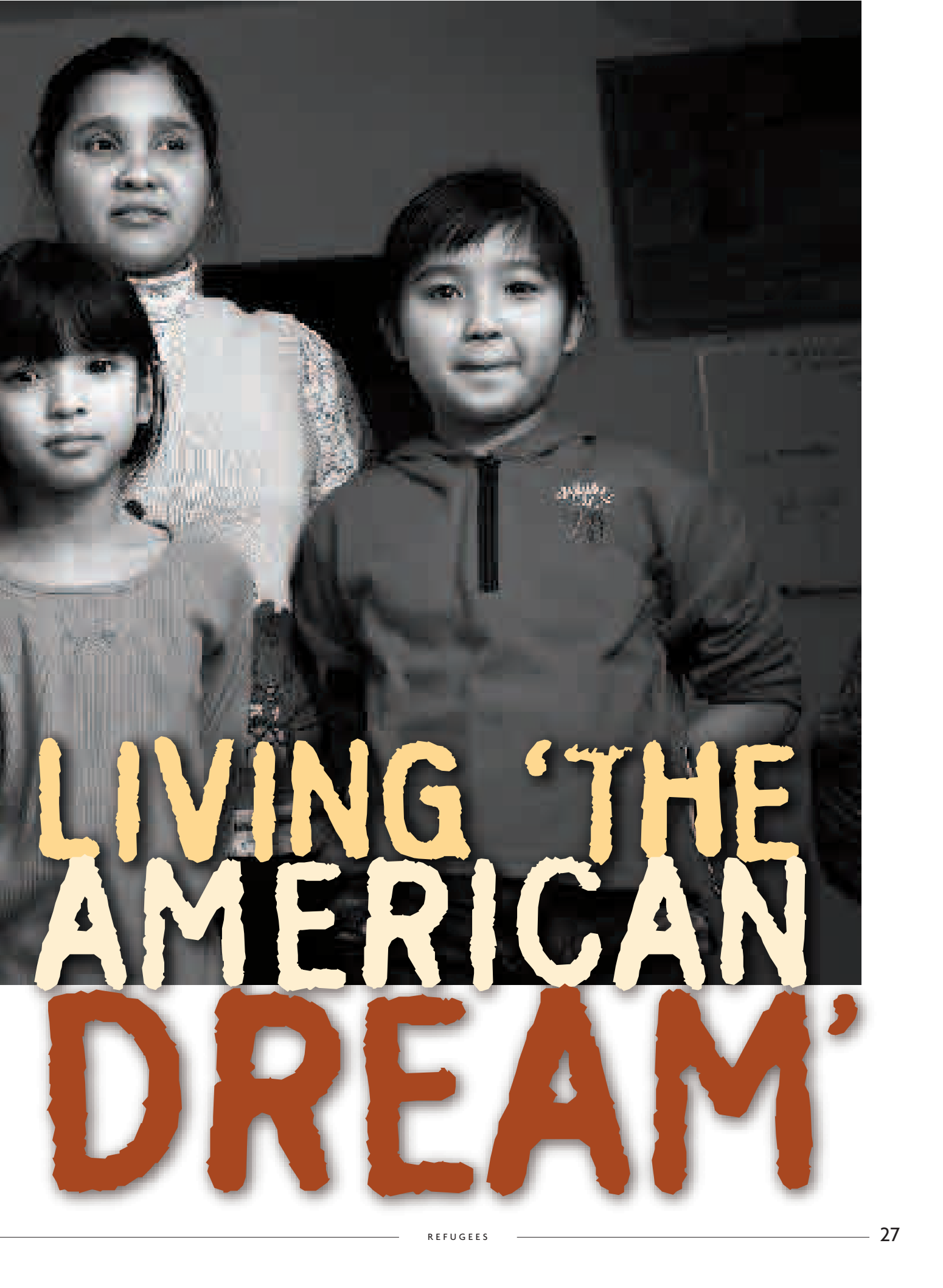
It looks like the love affair could continue for some time to come. ■

Multiculturalism at work: A roadside billboard in Bosnian.



**A DAY IN THE LIFE
OF AUNG TIN MOE
AND HIS FAMILY**





LIVING 'THE
AMERICAN
DREAM'



05:30 The start of a new day

The first floor apartment at N° 1122 St. Vincent Street, Utica, upper New York State, is a long way from the bamboo huts and jungles of Southeast Asia.

On this particular day, Kin Soe Moe rises at 5:30 a.m. prepares a simple lunch of rice, beef and soup before leaving for an early shift at work.

Outside, the sidewalks are covered in several inches of snow—that is not too bad, really, because sometimes during the long winter drifts many feet deep bury the place—and with icy gusts blowing

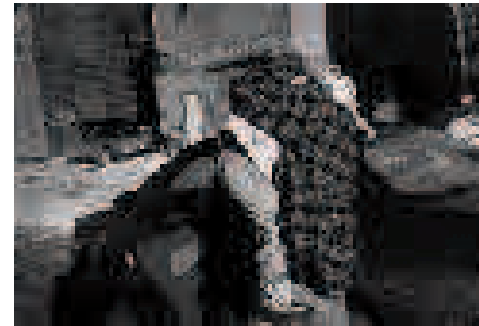
through the deserted streets temperatures have dipped to minus 30 degrees below freezing.

“It was so cold when we arrived in this country and it is still so cold. Oh so cold,” the diminutive Kin Soe Moe shivers as she begins the short drive to the surgical instrument plant where she earns nearly eight dollars an hour assembling precision equipment.

“It took me two times to pass my driving test,” she giggles as she recalls her early efforts to come to terms with a new life in America. “I had never seen snow before let alone



06:00 Mom gets four-year-old Thomas Dale, the youngest member of the family, ready for his day



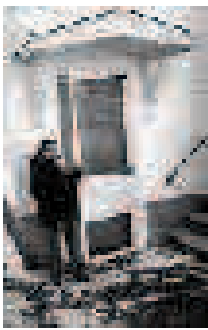
07:45 Thomas Dale arrives at school



Nine-year-old Kapaw

drove on it. It is still so scary.”

At home, 9-year-old Kapaw Sasam and her 8-year-old sister, Kapru Htoo, scurry around their first floor home, packing school satchels, cuddling their brother, 4-year-old Thomas Dale, before donning winter overcoats to catch the school bus at 7:30 a.m. for a private Catholic school.



06:30 Off to work



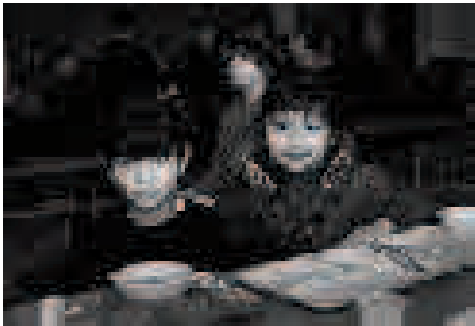
07:30 The girls leave for school



07:40 Battling the ice



Day-care center complex



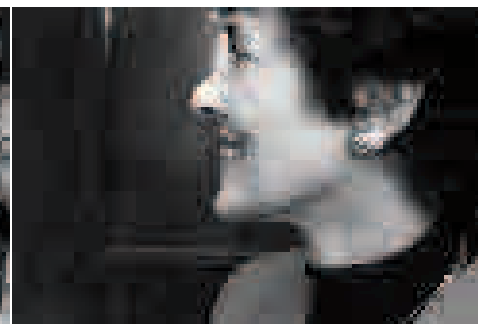
08:15 Breakfast at school



09:00 Getting down to work



Sasam at the computer

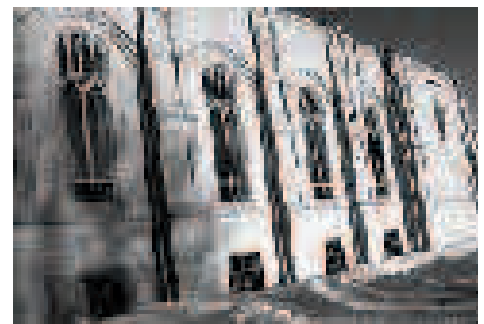


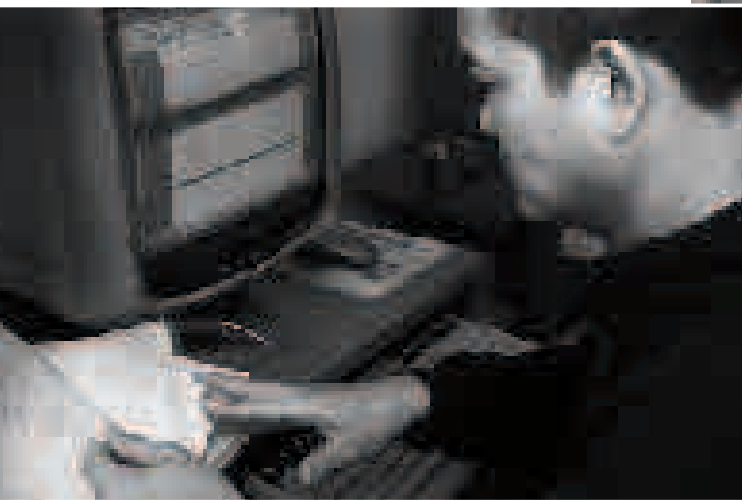
Carol Polito, principal of the school

Husband Aung Tin Moe drives his son to a day nursery fifteen minutes later. Three times a week, he works a 12-hour shift at the same plant as his wife. On the other days he is a full-time student at the Mohawk Valley Community College studying electronic engineering technology.

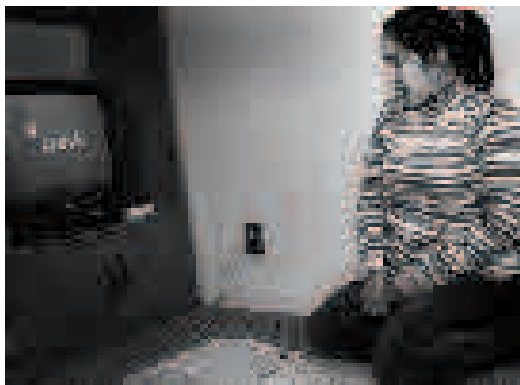
Late in the afternoon Kin Soe Moe collects her son and returns

home to prepare the family evening meal. "Ah, I am so tired. I have a headache. I will rest for just three minutes," she says, slumping on a sofa briefly. She collects her daughters from an after-school center before returning home, completing a dozen other household chores, serving dinner and, if there is no other crisis, slumping into bed before 9 p.m.





09:00 Studying at home



Meanwhile her daughters enjoy a snack and play with friends after school before being picked up by their mother

Between work, school and study, husband Aung Tin Moe often gets only three hours of sleep a night.

They have little waking time together and already worry they are not spending enough time instructing their children in their native language.

It is difficult 'living the American dream.'

ESCAPING TO A NEW LIFE

The family are minority ethnic Karens

from Myanmar (Burma). Aung Tin Moe was a student activist against that country's military regime and was forced to flee into the jungle where he married his wife and where, in bamboo huts, his two daughters were born.

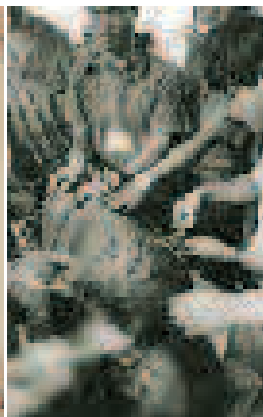
"Many pregnant women at the time were suffering from malaria. Some newly born children died of brain damage," Kin Soe Moe remembers. "I was one of the very lucky ones. I didn't get malaria and

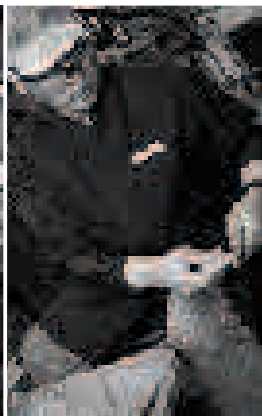
the girls were lucky, too. They were healthy."

The family moved on to neighboring Thailand in the late 1990s, but living in a refugee camp their future was unclear. Returning home would certainly mean a hazardous life on the run from the army and possible death.

He decided instead to make an unauthorized trip to the Thai capital, Bangkok, to seek official refugee status and, perhaps, a new life in

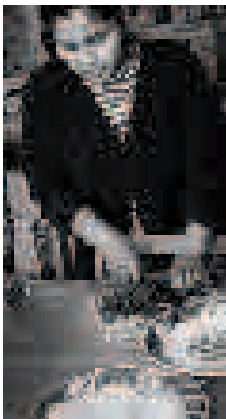
Life on the run and marriage in the rain forests before starting a new life in America.





15:30 After finishing work Kin Soe Moe picks up her son from day care and returns home to study English

12:00 Husband Aung Tin Moe begins work at the same plant as his wife



17:00 Dinner is prepared and eaten by the family, minus father who is still at work

another country.

"I hitched a ride on a truck," he remembers. "Before each police checkpoint, I would hop off, make a long detour around the checkpoint and then get back on board. It took me two days to reach Bangkok."

When his wife and children tried to join him later they bribed a policeman to take them in his official car. "When we reached each checkpoint, I concentrated on breastfeeding my youngest girl and

didn't dare look at anyone else," she said. "They thought we belonged in the car and let us pass."

After living in Bangkok surreptitiously and working on a construction site—had they been picked up by the police they may have been sent back to a camp or to Myanmar—they obtained the coveted refugee status. Since they had no immediate family or direct sponsor in the United States which would have made it easier to apply, it took them another full year to obtain permission to enter the country for resettlement.

There is a small but thriving 250-strong Burmese community in Utica, mainly ethnic Karens. Four-year-old Thomas Dale

Moe was the first child to be born within the group.

The family sends some of their wages back to Myanmar to support family back there. Even on modest salaries, they nevertheless also decided to send their daughters to a private school for a top education and at the Our Lady of Lourdes school principal Carol Polito calls her two Karen pupils "Delightful. They are a credit to the school and to their parents."

Aung Tin Moe will complete his studies at community college this year, but then plans to continue his education at the State University of New York for two more years.

The phrase 'Living the American Dream' is often overused and devalued, but in this particular case, difficult though it may be to achieve, it could be true. ■



00:30 He returns after midnight, in time for three hours of sleep before the start of another day

