

courage

For Nino Habalashvili, a place to call home

©UNHCR/V. Sokolova



Nino Habalashvili is a long-time resident of Gizel centre, a former tourist hostel, - one of 54 collective centres for refugees from Georgia scattered across the republic of North Ossetia-Alania.

For the 147 refugees from Georgia living in the refugee centre in the North Ossetia-Alania town of Gizel, the only way to hear what's going on in the outside world is by word of mouth – their Soviet style TV-sets are covered with a thick layer of dust, and have been out of order ever since 1991. The Gizel facility is just one of many such shelters, and within its walls lies the fate of the largest refugee group residing in Russia. They are refugees from Georgia, who became homeless when they fled their troubled country in the early nineties. In the long years since then, with the help of UNHCR, they have been striving for official recognition, and with it, the opportunity for a dignified life.

The 1991-1992 conflict in Georgia created more than 55,000 refugees (UNHCR data), while according to estimates the number could be as high as 110,000. At the time, except for the fortunate few with relatives and friends, there was nowhere for them to find shelter. For the overwhelming majority, anywhere that provided a roof over their heads was taken over, from tourist resorts to sanatoriums, dormitories and even abandoned cow-sheds.

Nino Habalashvili, a spirited woman, now bent with hard work and old age, is a veteran of the Gizel facility: she arrived in early 1992, just when the Georgian-Ossetian conflict reached its height. Her story is typical of the broken lives of the refugee community. "Armed men came and told my family to get out from our house, or they would kill us like they did to many others," she recalled. "I didn't want to go, but there was no choice for the people like me, for Ossetians, in Georgia at that time." She fled with her beloved nephew and sister. Sadly, in the intervening decade they both died, leaving the old woman to cope alone in her tiny, plywood-lined room, part of a shed on the grounds of a former tourist hotel. Still in mourning, Nino won't go out.



To help Nino Habalashvili cope, a few of the refugee men have begun renovating a room with construction materials, modest pieces of furniture and a heater provided by UNHCR.

But today is special. Over the past decade the residents of the Gizel facility have become like a big family, and some of the refugee men have agreed to renovate a room for Nino with some help from UNHCR – construction materials, modest pieces of furniture and a heater. A smile lights up her old face, and her blue eyes sparkle as she enters her new room.

Hard of hearing, Nino raises her voice: "There was no hope for many years to get a better home and better life. But just two years ago I was granted Russian citizenship. Until then I was nobody – refugee status gives nothing but a paper document. Like many other people I had to wait in line for many years for accommodation."

Indeed, as the Federal Migration Service did not exist at the time of the influx of refugees, and considering the chaotic situation after the collapse of USSR, a significant number of refugees remained unrecognized – some even beyond 1993. But with the adoption of the Federal Law on Refugees, and the setting up of the Federal Migration Service and its regional affiliates in North Ossetia-Alania – the status of these people finally received attention.

As a result, today there are only 240 persons from Georgia still holding refugee status in North Ossetia, as officially recognized by the Migration Department of the North Ossetian Interior Ministry, while almost 19,000 people have acquired Russian citizenship. UNHCR, in close cooperation with local authorities and NGOs, has been helping many refugees with no legal status to become Russian citizens.

courage