

What my refugee life gave me

Dwight English teacher **Dzenana Ćeman** on why she moves from to Germany and then to New York City.

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Where do you come from?

I was born in Bosnia. I lived there for about 10 years. Then there was a war in the country, and I soon became a refugee in Germany for three years, from 1992 to 1995. I was 12 years old. In 1995, I moved to United States, and I have been here since then.

Which country you consider as your hometown?

I didn't like my time in Germany because the circumstances were really bad due to the war. At there I feel as home but I don't feel that is where my heart is. When you are away from the place, you sometimes feel like a stranger, in your own home. I do go home during summer sometimes, but even though my relatives are there, I can't relate to the things people go through because I am not living there. Then I would say that New York City is my home.

How did you move from Bosnia to Germany?

That was with my mom, and my little sister. My father was a doctor and he was not allowed to leave, so he stayed in Bosnia for

3 years. The only reason he actually left Bosnia was in 1994. He was shot and wounded by a sniper. I was 12 years old at the time. They transferred him from Bosnia to Germany and saved him. Then we just wanted to leave Europe altogether. We just wanted to move on and go to the USA.

Do you remember how was your first day in Germany?

I was very lost, because we were told we would just stay there for couple of days, and we didn't know how long the war was going to last. We were all in a little hotel room with many other refugees. That was very difficult experience, because my mother needed to do everything on her own, my father wasn't there, and I have to be also take care of my younger sister. It was terrible that we weren't able to talk with my father because there was a war and we couldn't use phone. If I go back and think about what was the most difficult time in my life, I will probably say the age between 12 and 14 in Germany.

Did the situation get better when you moved to the USA?



When my father came and we applied to go to the United States, it was a beginning for us to face a better life. There was struggle but at least we were together. At first my father had to take his medical exams and start over from doing really random jobs that he didn't use to work. It was a big shock, but he took his medical exams and I and my sister went to college. It was a long road, as any immigrant story.

Was there any language difficulty?

I learnt German and English as foreign languages in Bosnia and then I learnt German in Germany as well. That was really helpful. I was able to communicate when I first came here. When you are younger, learning language is easier for you.

What are the most difficult and valuable thing you get after you came here?

The culture I think. It was difficult to get into American culture. Certain things were really embarrassing. I remember when we were playing baseball in gym class, I didn't understand the rules and I just ran around and didn't even know when to start. The relationships were so different as well, and the way people interact. In Europe we call people Ms. and Mr., but here I don't really see that kind of respect. There is a lack of formality and professionalism but also some good things in American culture. For example, they ask you what is your opinion, and let you say what you think. It does matter to some extent.

Are you considering living aboard for your whole life?

I really like New York. I see myself living here. I may stay here and then leave for two years, but I will definitely stay here for some time. I never have a specific plan for my life. When I was a child we planed to live in Bosnia for our whole life but it didn't happen

that way. The circumstances in my life didn't teach me to plan things.

Do you want to go back to Bosnia?

No, just for a visit. It's always nice to see relatives and the country is very beautiful to visit, but I feel as a stranger in my own country. I haven't lived there for such a long time. I can't even understand the people there. Their concerns are not my concerns and I can't find a common ground.

How does moving aboard impact on your family relationship?

For all of us, it gave us a chance to see different perspectives. Even though my relatives and I came from the same culture, we may see things differently. For my family relationship, the experience of a war made us realize that we might lose each other. We value each other. My parents now still call me everyday. When we experienced something to that extent, it brought us closer for our life time. My family is the most important thing to me.

How do you feel about the friendships here and the friendships you had in your hometown?

My friends in Bosnia reminds me of the good time I had before the war and my childhood. The friends I made in Germany are still my friends now. In the United States, people are very social and friendly and they say "hello" to everyone, but it is difficult to build up deep friendships. But I am grateful for the education I received here, which opened many doors for me. Now I don't put effort to make new friends. I have enough friends that are very close but not many. Having friends is very essential, but for me, friends are to have good time with. When I am in trouble I always talk to my family because they are the ones who have went through everything with me.