

ESOL Voices: Student Spotlight
Azem Cehaja

Azem Cehaja immigrated to the United States from Bosnia 20 years ago, and he now lives in Rochester with his wife. Azem is studying Information Technology at MCC. In "My Heroine," Azem shares the frightening details of the day he fled his country with his mother and siblings at the age of 12.

My Heroine

"To dare is to lose one's footing momentarily.

To not dare is to lose oneself."

Soren Kierkegaard

The first time I saw this quote it made me think of my mother in her most daring moments. It was the spring of 1992 with a new bloom of flowers and new life sprouting everywhere in my household, but death and destruction were the topic of the hour. My uncle was in the living room talking with my father, and they were trying to convince my mother to leave the country with us kids on the last convoy that was leaving the next morning.

My mother was sitting quietly with a look of concern on her face with occasional moments of crying as if she was trying to wash away each topic to non-existence. After what seemed to be the longest evening ever, my mother reluctantly told us kids to pack a few things but just enough that we could carry them. Then she stood up and walked over to my brother's crib who was only two years old at that time and she cried, "I don't know if I can do this!" as she thought about traveling with two-year-old. At which point both my uncle and my father in unison said, "You must!"

The next morning the air felt heavy full of tension and concern. Everybody was talking in bursts of short sentences as if to prevent any discussion of not leaving. We grabbed our things and headed outside. I remember looking around, and it felt like I was seeing everything in a dream realm. I remember brisk air, fog on grass, and everything seemed to move slower, not like slow motion but just a little slower than real life. As we were approaching the center of the city where we were meeting rest of unfortunate souls that were leaving, too, we made our way through a group of buildings and suddenly somebody yelled, "Run there is a sniper!" It was a soldier in one of the vestibules waving us in. I looked up and buildings like giants were staring ominously down at me. We made a short dart between buildings as the shots echoed through this brick jungle.

My mother was holding my sisters and my hands shaking like a leaf, and my father was holding my baby brother as if he was trying to conceal him inside his chest cavity. In the vestibule, there were a few soldiers crouched together pointing somewhere in the distance to the top of one building. One said, "I just saw muzzle flames coming from that direction." We were all quiet and horrified, staring at the soldiers waiting for instruction. They told us to make a run for another building across the street where we would be out of the line of the fire, and they would cover us as we have did this. And then they just yelled, "GO!" and there was just a cacophony of guns shooting, and we started running.

Once we reached the building, all I could see were faces of bewilderment and panicked breathing. My mother was frantically looking us over to see if we had been injured. Once she was done, there was a sigh of relief.

We finally had arrived at the place where we were about to board a convoy to the unknown. Once my mother realized what our transport was, she turned to my uncle and said, "They are going to load us up in a back of a truck like cattle."

He said, "That was our last option, there are no more buses." I guess since we were last to leave the city all the buses were gone. We would have to ride in the back of the big truck with at least 50 other people. At this point, we were trying to find out where they were taking us and we heard one of the drivers say it was Croatia, across the border.

Croatia is a border country of Bosnia, and they were taking most of the Bosnian refugees who were women, children, and older adults. My father was going to stay behind the same as my uncle along with the rest of the husbands and fathers who were of fighting age. Leaving my father was harder for all of us than leaving the country, but he had to stay. We said our goodbyes and we were off to the unknown.

Everything was fine until we reached the outskirts of the city and the truck suddenly stopped. Everyone in the truck started talking at once questioning why we had stopped. That is when the driver's head popped up over the truck tailgate, and he informed us that we were about to take a dirt road, and that he was going to put the tailgate cover down which until this point had been up. That meant we would be riding in the dark. Nobody said anything to the driver, and we were off in the darkness. The ride started to get rough, and we started bouncing up and down a little bit. At this point, we had been in the back of this truck for few hours, and it was starting to get dark on the outside as well, judging by the peepholes that people were making in the canvas.

With no warning at all, the truck started to pick up speed, and we all started bouncing up and down like little tennis balls. My mother told us to hug ourselves across the stomachs to prevent our organs from churning. People took their shoes off and started banging on the wall of the truck cabin signaling driver to stop the vehicle. The truck screeched to stop. The driver angrily banged on the side of the truck and said, "We are being shot at! I need you to stop banging." We heard the door slam, and we were off. After about half an hour we finally slowed down, and we were able to sit somewhat steadily. After a few more hours in the truck, we finally reached the border of Croatia. That is when we were informed that we were about to take a boat ride to Rijeka, which is on the coast of the Adriatic Sea.

When we were on the boat, we were finally able to get out and smell the fresh air of the sea. We noticed that there were a few Croatian soldiers on board with us and one of them made a comment to my mother saying, "We will need soldiers like him too," pointing at me, to which my mother replied confidently, "You worry about your own kids I'll take care of mine," as she stared in distance of the sea. I do not know what happened exactly to my mom during this whole ordeal, but she had a different glimmer in her eye. She stood tall and confident with only one mission, protecting her kids.

ESOL Voices is a collection of stories written by ESOL students at Monroe Community College. This publication highlights our MCC students who come from all over the world. Look for new stories three times each semester. We hope you enjoy our students' stories as much as we do.

Katie Leite & Pamela Fornieri, ESOL Program, October 2019