



A Bittersweet Homecoming

(top) Fadil Bytyci surveys the burned remains of a building in his home village. (top right) Tent cities like this one provided shelter for more than 1 million Kosovars. (bottom right) Naim Bytyci stands inside Cegrane Camp.

Crisis in KOSOVO

IN MARCH 1999, WAR EXPLODED IN KOSOVO AND MORE THAN 1 MILLION PEOPLE FLED. THE HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY RESPONDED WITH EMERGENCY AID. WHEN THE FIGHTING ENDED, A NEW JOURNEY BEGAN. THIS IS THE STORY OF A DAY IN THAT JOURNEY – THE RETURN OF ONE MAN AND HIS FAMILY THROUGH THE LANDSCAPE OF A TRAUMATIZED LAND.

FADIL BYTYCI IS AN OPTIMIST. He has to be. After enduring the loss of home, possessions and extended family, and spending three months in a refugee camp, Fadil is surprisingly upbeat. It is not just because he is finally going home – back to Kosovo from the CARE-run Cegrane Refugee Camp in Macedonia. It is also because his wife Flore and their five children depend on him to be so.

For the Bytyci family, the last few months have been a nightmare. Driven from their home by paramilitary forces, separated from other family members and then deported to Macedonia, they lost everything except the few possessions they could carry. Food, tents and other supplies provided by CARE only partially eased the trauma of war: Fadil's wife lost 22 pounds from stress.

Of the life they left behind, they have little information. And so Fadil stands in Cegrane Camp as the bus loads, talking to his wife and children, exchanging wry comments with his countrymen and trying to keep spirits up.





"If our house is burned, we will go to my relatives. If their house is burned, we will try some of our friends and neighbors," he says firmly. "Whatever happens, we'll get by."

It is only 9 a.m., and already Fadil's resolve is being tested: The bus that will take them back to Kosovo arrives late. His son Betim kicks the fender of the bus in frustration, and Fadil laughs. "The kids put pressure on us to leave with the first groups," he notes. "Their mother and I are the ones afraid of mines and booby traps and crazy people."

Fadil has reason to be afraid. A relative in the camp has told him that Flore's mother was shot and killed. Although he has not yet broken the news to Flore, her silence and drawn features tell him that "she is suspicious... something is not right."

Fadil will wait to break the news back in Kosovo, surrounded by other family members he hopes have survived the war. Flore sits quietly as the bus loads, dread eclipsing her face.

The last time Fadil saw his house was the backward glance he gave it as the family was marched away. Since then, all he has heard is that his village was shelled and some of the houses destroyed. "We're skeptical anything is left," says Fadil.

Most of the refugees face the same circumstances, and conversation on the bus is tinged with the worry of uncertainty.

Flore remains silent.

"I just hope everyone is okay," she says finally, shifting her

The Journey Home

(top) Avni, 11, and Fitim Bytyci, 10. (left) CARE distributed identity bracelets to children to prevent separation. Betim Bytyci's name, his parents' names and the name of their village are on his bracelet. (bottom) The bus approaches the border.





youngest child, Naim, on her lap. It is the most she has said all day.

As the bus approaches the border, the tension – as well as the excitement – grows. But excitement soon gives way to dismay at the more ominous signs of return: Burned and abandoned cars litter the road, signs of the hasty flight of Kosovo's people.

Even more frightening are the dozens of rounded holes cut into the pavement at 20-foot intervals. They are the remains of anti-tank mines placed by retreating forces and now removed by NATO troops. Still, the bus driver flinches every time the wheels bump over one of the holes.

Closer and closer to home, and then, the first shock: the village of Ferizaj. It is not one of the most badly damaged areas, yet the refugees stand, whisper and point at the bombed and burned houses of friends and relatives.

Fadil whispers, "I am more worried about our own place."

The bus finally stops at the crossroads to their village, and the Bytyci family disembarks. They have heard that the dirt road leading to their village may be mined, but Fadil sees friends working in a field, "so they're alive!"



Uncertainty and Hope

(top) Fitorë Bytyci, 7, gets her first glimpse of home as her family disembarks from the bus. (right) Fitorë Bytyci and her youngest child, Naim, 3.



As they draw nearer to their home, Fadil runs ahead, shouting delightedly, "I see the roof of our house!" Fadil's sister and sister-in-law walk from the house. Seconds later, Fadil's mother comes running from the fields, cheeks wet with tears. His family survived the war, the house is untouched and "everyone is safe!"

Fadil's sister tells how only his mother stayed – the rest fled to Kosovo's capital, Pristina. "We hid in friends' houses. We went through terrible times. We feared for our lives," she says.

But of Flore's family there is no mention. Finally, Flore asks, "But... how is my mother?"

When Fadil's mother starts to respond, he stops her.

It is our cue to go.

Fadil walks us down the green hills overlooking the empty houses and roads of Slovinje and speaks of the future: "I'm optimistic," he says. "We are a big family, and we will help each other and manage to survive. I don't want charity. All I want is a loan to buy a tractor so I can start farming again.

"I have my family and my house. I guess I'm a lucky guy."

A Joyful Reunion

(top) Fadil's mother, Sabile, listens as Fadil recounts the family's experiences since they left home. (left) Fadil joyfully greets his sister.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Fadil Bytyci and his family stayed for nearly three months in Cegrane Camp, the largest refugee camp in Macedonia and one of eight run by CARE. CARE and its partners supplied them with food, shelter, health care, education facilities for the younger children, water and sanitation, and mother and child services.

Back in Kosovo, the Bytyci family is eligible for short-term shelter, food and demining assistance from CARE.

CARE is providing these services throughout the Bytyci family's home region of Ferizaj (Urosevac), and in Mitrovica and Lipljan as well. CARE also is offering longer-term agricultural rehabilitation assistance for Kosovars to get back on their feet and revive the local economy.

Your support of CARE helps provide emergency humanitarian aid in the wake of both natural and man-made disasters and makes a difference between life and death for victims.

"We are very grateful for the help we've received from CARE," says Fadil.

— Article by Wendy Driscoll:
Photography by Wendy Driscoll and Jacob Holt

Snapshots

(top) Florë's grandfather, Bajram Vitija, stands framed in the window of his house. (middle) Fadil stands with his neighbor, whose wife was killed in the fighting. He holds her photo aloft. (bottom) The Bytyci family at home.

