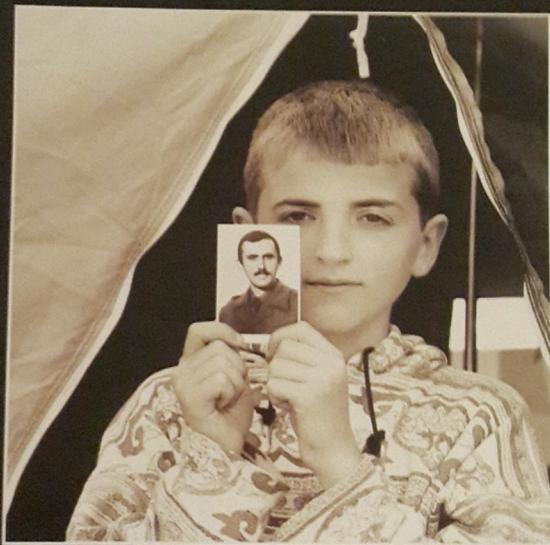


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BALKAN SON REDUX

The story of a Kosovo refugee comes full circle

By Andy Trincia



Cover and photo from the 1999 profile in *WorldView*.

A somber-looking boy wearing a hoodie stands outside his family's tent in a Kosovar Albanian refugee camp in Macedonia. Holding a small portrait of his missing father, his intense eyes stare into the camera.

The haunting image was featured on the cover of the Spring 1999 issue of *WorldView*, when this magazine was still printed in black and white. The editors

called him "Balkan Son." Diving into the story and accompanying photos, readers learned that this 12-year-old was an upbeat, gregarious boy despite the surrounding Kosovo War and brutal ethnic cleansing resulting from the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. Showing resolve amid difficult refugee conditions, the boy made the most of his experience in the camp, beefing up his English by making friends with NATO troops and doing whatever he could to help his mother and sister while searching

for his missing father and brother.

Fifteen years later, the Balkan Son—Çelik Nimani, now 27—has resurfaced.

In May, on the 15th anniversary of the NATO bombing that led to the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo, Çelik posted a photo from the *WorldView* story on Instagram. It showed him in a light moment, smiling and horsing around with camouflage-wearing NATO soldiers from the United Kingdom. He added the note, "Thank you, NATO."

Through the Internet he then tracked

down the story's author, Cindy Karp, and editors at *WorldView*. He was sorry for not writing earlier and simply wanted to say, "Thank you."

The National Peace Corps Association sent word to Peace Corps Director Carrie Hessler-Radelet, who relayed the story to Stephen Kutzy, country director of the brand-new Peace Corps Kosovo program just as the first Volunteer trainees were arriving in the capital, Prishtina. Kutzy met with Çelik to get acquainted and coincidentally learned that Çelik's wife's cousins were at that moment hosting a Peace Corps trainee. Kutzy invited Çelik and his wife, Zejnepe Morina Nimani, to a reception for Hessler-Radelet at the U.S. Ambassador's residence and the couple attended the swearing-in ceremony for the Volunteers along with the host-family cousins.

Çelik still thinks about those British troops from NATO who dedicated time to protect the families and play with kids in their spare time.

"I look back at the magazine every year and read through the story and the imagination that I had back then, and where I am now," he said. "I always in particular like the picture of my happy face sitting on the big truck with the NATO soldiers, and wishing to meet them one day and thank them and their countries for helping our country earn its rightful independence and stop the killing of innocent people. The *WorldView* story gets stronger each year as one moves forward and tries not to forget history, but moves on with life."

There was, incidentally, a happy ending for the Nimani family. Karp, the writer, met Çelik while he searched notes and letters posted in the camp, trying to locate his father and brother who, in the chaos that followed Serbian troops forcing them from their Prishtina home, were separated and sent to a different, then-unknown refugee camp in Macedonia.

Karp then followed Çelik around the camp, sometimes while he acted as a young translator for Doctors Without Borders staff, and the "Balkan Son" story

was born. She helped the Nimanis reunite by sorting through newspapers and posting a classified ad. The two now keep in touch after being reunited themselves.

Once together, the Nimanis were one of many ethnic Albanian Kosovar families selected for immigration privileges to

Canada. While integration there was smooth and they were grateful for being treated well, the war ended a few months later and they chose to return to Kosovo. Çelik's mother, a newspaper copy editor, went back to journalism and works at the country's leading daily. His father, a



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ÇELIK NIMANI



news editor and translator for 20 years at Kosovo's national TV station, did construction after the war as it was in high demand and now works for the Kosovo Security Council, a prominent government agency.

As for Çelik, he graduated from engineering school (where he met his wife Zejnepe, a civil engineer) and is wrapping up his master's thesis in business management. He runs a 20-person technology company that outsources services to foreign companies, including development of web sites, apps and design. A true entrepreneur, he's heavily involved in Kosovo's fledgling start-up business community—very much in the spirit of Peace Corps—and networking throughout the world. He's even been invited to speak in countries that do not recognize Kosovo's national independence, which it declared in 2008.

Çelik said Kosovo's independence is not what its people expected now that there is 40 percent unemployment, widespread corruption and lack of investments to make a better future for the country, not unlike what occurred

elsewhere in the region in the years following the fall of communism. He believes these challenges must be tackled by a new generation of people, perhaps educated outside of the country, who can achieve results and build a better future for the next generations.

"It's something close to my heart in which together with friends and like-minded people, we help shape the start-up scene in Kosovo and open the mindset of the people to opportunities by creating jobs, not waiting for those jobs," he said. "As an organizer and facilitator for Startup Weekend (a global, Seattle-based nongovernmental organization), I work directly with the community of Kosovo but also with those in other countries, to make impact, create change and educate people into entrepreneurial action."

After the war, incredibly, the Nimani

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Top: Çelik holds the Kosovo flag; At left and bottom: Meeting Peace Corps Director Carrie Hessler-Radelet and Kosovo Country Director Stephen Kutzy at the swearing in ceremony for the first group of Volunteers in Kosovo.

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home in Prishtina was untouched. The two-story house with a garage—they were a well-educated, middle-class family—had withstood the barrage of bombs on Kosovar soil. The family still lives there. Çelik and his wife, his parents and sister, who’s a doctor specializing in neonatology, occupy the home. His brother eventually returned to Canada where he lives with his wife and three children.

“Some areas of Prishtina were bombed and nearly 60 percent of the rest of Kosovo was completely burned down,” Çelik recalled. “Some people managed to return, including us, and find their house standing and intact. It was a miracle. But this was not the case for many people who had to build everything from the ground up and continue life without family members, relatives or friends lost during the war. Many people are still missing with their fates unclear.”

At the recent swearing-in ceremony, Kutzy, the country director, presented Çelik with a Peace Corps lapel pin. Çelik called it a “true honor” and felt that he had come full circle.

“The most amazing thing is when you see how much these people manage to learn from host families in just a few weeks, and how they’re going to dedicate two years of their life to volunteer for my country,” he said. “Ever since I got the Peace Corps pin, I feel like an honorary member of the Peace Corps, something that makes me proud. This also reminds me of the mission of how Peace Corps was created by President John F. Kennedy to encourage mutual understanding between Americans and people of other nations and cultures.” **WV**

Andy Trincia (Romania 2002-2004) is a writer based in Sacramento, Calif. His work has been published in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Wichita Eagle*, *The News & Observer* (Raleigh), *The Florida Times-Union* and *Calgary Herald*; *National Geographic’s Glimpse*; *Globe Trekker’s Pilot Guides*; *Peace Corps Writers*; *Carolina Alumni Review*; and *Northeastern* magazine.

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