

## **Unspeakable act; loving response**

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**By Dean Nelson**

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In his two-room home in the mountains separating Kosovo from Macedonia, Hamdi Shabiu has left his daughter's backpack hanging on the wall. Next to the backpack are medals and uniform patches from a U.S. Army Reserve doctor who heads a humanitarian relief organization in San Diego and other U.S. cities. Above the medals a small Albanian flag crosses a small U.S. flag.

There is also a laminated letter from a U.S. brigadier general commanding all military personnel to treat the Shabiu family with respect and dignity.

This month, Slobodan Milosovic is trying to defend his actions as former leader of Yugoslavia before the World Court. The atrocities committed by Serbs and Albanians against each other during their war were stunning in their severity. But nothing compares, Shabiu says, to what happened to his daughter at the hands of an American soldier.

Two years ago, Shabiu's 11-year-old daughter, Merita, was abducted, raped, killed and buried in a snowbank by a U.S. soldier on policing duty. Shabiu and his wife, Remzije, still grieve, yet they also marvel at the U.S. response to the horror. Within the same tragic event they experienced Americans at their worst and their best.

When the NATO jets screamed over the mountains to find their targets in Kosovo three years ago, Merita Shabiu would stand at the edge of her village and wave.

"She knew that they were coming to save us from the Serbs, and that made her happy," said Hamdi Shabiu. Ten days before the NATO strikes, Hamdi and Remzije had been detained and beaten by Serbs in Vitina, the city closest to the Shabius' home. After two days of beatings, which caused blood to flow from Hamdi's ears, he and Remzije were taken into a nearby forest and dumped. "Our children had no idea where we were, so they were very frightened," he said.

The NATO jets gave the Shabiu family a sense that their world would be safe soon. Because of the hostilities between the Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, and because those hostilities reached a peak during the NATO bombings, the Shabius were forced to leave their small village high in the mountains and live in Vitina. Their five children went to local schools. On Jan. 13, 2000, Merita did not come home from school. Hamdi, Remzije and the other children searched for her, but without success. Hamdi reported her absence to the police.

Two days later, children in a schoolyard told Hamdi that there was a child's body in a nearby building -- they pointed to a bombed-out structure surrounded by U.S. soldiers. He identified himself to the soldiers and told them that his daughter was missing.

"They took me into the building, and I saw a U.S. officer crying," Hamdi said. The officer showed Hamdi a photo, and asked if it were Merita. "She died a horrible death," he said. "I almost passed out when I saw her."

The photo showed his daughter with beaten, swollen eyes, bruises around her neck, and what appears to be a bullet hole in her forehead. Her thin, yellow hair was matted behind her head. She had been killed by U.S. Army Sgt. Frank Ronghi, from Ohio, and covered with snow and leaves about two miles outside of town.

"She loved being clean, she loved school; she wanted to be a doctor," Hamdi recalled, tears freely flowing. She was discovered in a plastic bag by American soldiers after they were informed by a private who had helped Ronghi hide the body.

### Final indignity

Hamdi Shabiu works in other people's fields to support his family. He cuts firewood. He raises bees. He could not afford much of a funeral, but approximately 2,000 people attended -- many from Camp Bondsteel, the nearby U.S. military base. The family also could not afford a headstone, so Merita was buried in an unmarked grave in a community cemetery. The earth around the grave was not well-packed; the ground settled frequently underneath the two wooden stakes Hamdi used to identify her grave from the others.

It was this final indignity that helped move Brig. Gen. Dennis Hardy to approach Gary Morsch, a U.S. Army Reserve doctor who had recently been called to active duty to Bondsteel. Morsch is the founder and president of Heart To Heart International, a humanitarian relief agency with offices in San Diego, Kansas City, Oklahoma City and, since Sept. 11, Manhattan.

"I hadn't been there 24 hours before a translator from the general's staff talked to me in the cafeteria and asked if I thought Heart To Heart could help the Shabius," he said. "The general said they were hungry, sick and grieving. Of course I said yes."

Morsch was put in a convoy of four Humvees and 10 U.S. soldiers in full battle gear, and they drove two hours on the cattle paths that led to the tiny Shabiu home. The family had no telephone or electricity, so there was no way to warn them that the deployment was en route.

"I didn't know what to think when I saw all of them coming," Hamdi said. "At first we were very afraid."

Morsch said that Hamdi immediately put him at ease with his hospitality as he moved blankets and benches for the soldiers to sit on, and searched for enough cups for tea. "He's such a humble, hurting man, and yet he wanted to be a good host," Morsch said. Morsch told Hamdi how sorry Americans were for the tragedy of Merita's death, and that he wanted to help the family.

"I was very comforted to hear his words," Hamdi said. Drita Perezic, the translator who approached Morsch for Gen. Sanchez, said that the family quickly forgave the U.S. Army for Ronghi's actions.

"But the Army felt horrible because one of their own, the very people sent over to Kosovo to protect the people of Kosovo, did something so horrible," she said. "It seemed to me that a non-government organization could give them some help."

Morsch asked to see where Merita was buried, so he could pay his respects. "I was shocked at what I saw," he said. "It was a mound of dirt with no markings other than two sticks and an empty cup, which is part of an Albanian custom. There was no distinguishing it from any of the other graves."

A few weeks later Morsch returned with clothes and food collected by soldiers at Bondsteel. He also brought his personal laptop computer. He asked Merita's parents what they would like on a gravestone. They wanted an Albanian flag, of course. As for how they wanted to remember their daughter, they wanted the monument to say, "She loved everyone. She taught us to love each other."

Morsch asked if they wanted a picture of her on it. They brought out a school picture -- thin hair, shy smile, lively eyes. Morsch brought out his digital camera and took a picture of the picture, then loaded it into his computer and designed the headstone with the family, awe-struck, crowded behind him.

There was just one more thing they wanted, they said. Opposite the Albanian flag, could Morsch put an American flag?

"Here was a family that had lost a daughter in the most brutal way because of an American, yet they wanted our flag on her headstone," he said.

Common cause

Word spread throughout the U.S. outposts that a gravestone was being designed for the Shabius. Money from soldiers came in quickly.

"Colonels came to me in tears, saying 'Thank you for giving us a chance to tell them how we feel,' " Morsch said. "Then they'd hand me \$300 in cash that the soldiers collected."

More than \$4,000 was donated by the soldiers, enough that Morsch opened a bank account in town with the stipulation that withdrawals could only be made for humanitarian purposes.

"That was quite a sight when we arrived at the bank with all of our weapons, helmets and flak jackets," Morsch said. "We set off every alarm they had, trying to put money in their bank."

Another convoy brought the paid-for gravestone to a cemetery outside of Vitina, where Merita's body was permanently buried. There are about a dozen other graves in the fenced-off area. About 100 feet away is a memorial at a site where Albanians died battling Serbs. Merita's stone stands tall.

In addition to paying for the headstone, soldiers donated enough money to get the family two cows. A U.S.-based missionary group, Eastern European Outreach, also got involved, providing food and clothing.

"I am always amazed," Morsch said, "at how quickly people want to help ease the pain of other people. What that soldier did was unspeakable. But look at the response of his own unit. Most people want to help one another."

The response from Americans for another American's action makes Hamdi Shabiu adamant about who is to blame for Merita's death, and who is not.

"I am not an educated man, but I know that this soldier was not following orders when he killed my daughter," Hamdi said. "I will not blame all Americans or all American soldiers."

Morsch recently visited the Shabiu family, this time as a civilian, and visited Merita's grave. Grass has grown up around the headstone he designed, in a similar way that grass surrounds the bombed-out buildings that have not yet been repaired or replaced. Still, it stands as a flower in an otherwise desolate field.

"Two years ago I came on sad, official business," he said. "This time I was just checking up on my friends."

The war is over, and Kosovo is rebuilding. If the cease-fire in bordering Macedonia holds, the Shabius' village will remain at peace. But the grief over a daughter lost, and the gratitude over the response, easily moves Merita's parents, brothers and sisters, to tears.

Before he departed the Shabiu home on his recent visit, Morsch had one question. He wanted to know if the

parents wanted to send a message to Ronghi, the man who killed their daughter. Ronghi, who confessed at his military trial, is serving a life sentence without parole in a military prison in Kansas.

At Morsch's question, Remzije left the room, weeping. Hamdi put his hands together in front of his face. "Forgiving him might be impossible," Hamdi finally said, his head looking toward the ceiling, then at his daughter's belongings on the nearby wall, tears flowing. "But this soldier will probably die in prison, won't he?"

Morsch nodded yes.

"I don't know if that is right, either," Hamdi said. "There is no use for two mothers crying for their children. One has cried enough already."

Caption: 1 PIC

1. The headstone for Merita Shabiu's grave was designed by Gary Morsch of Heart To Heart International, and paid for by U.S. soldiers. 2. Hamdi and Remzije Shabiu, Merita's parents, outside their home in the mountains of Kosovo. (E-3) 1,2. Dean Nelson photo

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