

One man's journey from **persecution to freedom**

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After fleeing a civil war in Somalia and a refugee camp in Kenya, a Somali Bantu family finds a home and hope in Rochester

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The snow falls in fat, lacy chunks. It sparkles beneath street lamps and softens hard edges of trees in the courtyard.

But Sharif Mhiji sees no beauty in this scene outside his apartment. Only another hurdle.

Inside, he keeps the heat cranked to 80. He wears five layers of clothing and stays zipped in a leather jacket.

"In Africa, we don't have snow," he says. "We don't even have cold."

What Mhiji and his people lacked in Africa could fill a list the length of this page. It would include things essential not just to an American existence, but to the most basic modern one: Electricity. Paved roads. Flush toilets.

Living without such amenities his entire 30 years has made Mhiji's adjustment to Rochester that much more dizzying.

But here, Mhiji has a home and hope - treasures that have eluded him and his fellow Somali Bantu refugees since they fled the civil war in Somalia about 12 years ago.

Like Mhiji, many of them suffered along the way. They, too, witnessed the killing of loved ones. They, too, walked for days on end and hid from merciless soldiers - only to face more violence from higher-class Somalis in the refugee camps of Kenya.

Responding to their plight, the United States has agreed to take them in, in one of its most ambitious resettlement efforts. A total of 13,000 Somali Bantus will be resettled in the United States, the largest group of African refugees ever admitted.

Hundreds have been flown to cities nationwide, including Rochester, where as many as 230 refugees are expected to arrive by the end of 2004.

Most will be placed in apartments in the South Wedge neighborhood, in close proximity to one another and to Somalis who came in an earlier wave of immigration.

Mhiji and his family came in the welcome heat of July, clutching two pieces of luggage and a plastic bag of documents.

"We sit on a plane," Mhiji says, describing his first commercial flight, "but we are looking like people sitting in a house."

Neither Mhiji, with his easy grin, nor his family exhibit visible traces of the agony they endured. But their adjustment over the last seven months has been slow, eased only in part by Mhiji's ability to speak English - a rare skill among these Somali Bantus, who are largely unable to read or write even in their own language.

While the family has readily taken to some aspects of American life, such as pizza and television, they and their cousins down the street have struggled mightily with others.

They still eat on the floor instead of around a table. They still laugh hysterically at the voices that issue mysteriously from phones. They still forgo the slippers that resettlement volunteers gave them, preferring to go barefoot indoors.

They've also fallen victim to their first winter colds. They blame the weather, repeating one of the few phrases they've mastered: "The snow is not good."

Not good, perhaps, but vastly better than the torment they left behind.

'Seeing blood every day'

Mhiji grew up on a farm near the Shabelle and Juba rivers of southern Somalia. His family's mango, banana, sugar cane and corn crops flourished in the equatorial heat.

He and his twin brother were born in 1974, to the second of his father's two wives. They were the youngest of 11 children; another sibling died before Mhiji was born, eaten alive by a crocodile.

Mhiji's childhood, by comparison, was relatively uneventful. But at the age of 18, when civil war had been raging for about a year, Mhiji watched helplessly as armed Somali soldiers invaded his parents' farm.

They stole corn and other belongings, he says. Then they pointed a gun at one of his older brothers and ordered him to rape their mother. When the brother refused, they shot him in the chest.

"A lot of people die like that," Mhiji says sadly. "Fathers protecting daughters," sons shielding mothers.

In an instant, the farm had become a dangerous place. So Mhiji and his family sought cover in the forest.

They lived in a shelter made of wood and grass, subsisting on fish they caught in the river nearby. But they were vulnerable there, too; soldiers routinely searched the forest for Bantus and their stores of food. After two weeks, Mhiji's father led the family back to the farm.

Mhiji, though, did not feel safe there. One week after returning home, he set out - with his family's blessing - for Kismaayo, a port town about 45 miles away. He took with him a friend, some corn and water. He left behind his family, most painfully, his mother and twin brother.

Mhiji and his friend walked for two days in the harsh sun, diving into the bush when cars approached, and resuming when the vehicles passed.

At night, the pair slept, fearing only the gun-toting soldiers. Wild animals, Mhiji says, had been driven away by the war.

In the end, Kismaayo proved no more hospitable than home. Work was hard to find, particularly for the Bantus, for whom only the most menial jobs were available even in peacetime.

And the atrocities continued. Mhiji says he saw soldiers stuffing Bantus into containers "like a punishment" and cutting the limbs off others.

"We normally are seeing blood every day of Somali Bantu," he says. "Sometimes I dream about that."

Weeks after arriving in Kismaayo, Mhiji said goodbye to his friend, to the town and its the bloodshed, and boarded a truck bound for Kenya.

Seeking refuge

Like his trek to Kismaayo, the trip to Kenya took two harrowing days. Again, the sun beat down. Again, soldiers posed a threat. But Mhiji made it safely to the border town of Liboi, where refugees headed to Dadaab are processed.

Dadaab, as the refugee camp is known, is in desolate territory - a place that was home mostly to scrub brush before it became safe harbor to more than 100,000 refugees.

Mhiji arrived alone. He remembers being given food and a plastic sheet "to build a house." He was lonely, he says. But he quickly located the brother of the friend he'd left behind in Kismaayo, and from him learned to speak English. Over the 12 years he lived there, he would be joined by others he knew: people he calls his sisters and brothers, though in America, they would probably be referred to as cousins.

One of those "sisters" introduced him to a young woman, Masekwa Mgaza, and arranged their marriage, which produced three children in a short time.

During their stay in the camp, Mhiji landed a series of jobs, first with CARE International, an independent humanitarian organization, then with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the agency that runs the camp. For both outfits, he was responsible mostly for cooking, and loading and unloading supplies, tasks that earned him little more than \$1.50 a day.

But any good fortune that befell Mhiji was relative. He had known happier times, and in the camp, he says, "you are not happy."

There was never enough food; about 6 1/2 pounds of corn and one cup of oil had to last each refugee 15 days. He had to spend his scant earnings on supplemental food supplies at the camp's market.

And violence broke out often, usually between the Somali and the Bantus, who assumed the same social pecking order that prevailed in Somalia - with the Bantus at the bottom.

Mhiji, though, escaped injury. In fact, the only physical scars he bears from his years in Africa are three circular marks that arc along his forehead. Those, he explains, are from burns he received as a child in a ritual ceremony performed to keep the head from enlarging.

The deeper scars are mental. They may be apparent only to Mhiji, and then, only when he dreams.

A way out

Deliverance from Dadaab came unexpectedly for Mhiji.

He'd been working, apparently at the behest of UNHCR officials, at a different camp, about an hour and 20 minutes away by commuter plane, he says. He was there for one month, cooking and translating, when his number came up.

He returned to Dadaab to collect his family and meager possessions. Then they, along with thousands of other lucky Bantus, began the process of relocation.

Following an official interview, he knew that he and his family would be moving to America - a place he could not envision but where, he says, "nobody can do something against me, nobody will kill me."

For a decade, the UNHCR had searched for a country willing to accept the Somali Bantus. Two other African countries had rejected them, citing instability of their own.

Tanzania in 1994 had become swamped with refugees fleeing genocide in neighboring Rwanda. Mozambique could not accept even its own displaced population, which had run to other countries following a brutal civil war in the 1990s.

Finally, the UNHCR turned to the United States, which had earlier accepted more than 3,000 of the so-called Lost Boys of Sudan, based on their vulnerability to persecution and death in their country. The Bantus qualified on that basis, as well.

Their ancestors were seized by Arab slavers from their homelands - Mozambique, Tanzania and Malawi - and forced into slavery in Somalia in the 18th and 19th centuries. Even after slavery in that country was abolished, the Bantus were never truly free.

They were relegated to second-class citizenship, denied access to education, jobs and any meaningful political representation. In many ways, notes one report, their existence paralleled that of former slaves in America's Deep South.

Many of the Bantus swore they'd never return to Somalia, even if it meant a lifetime in the refugee camps. But those who were spared that fate - and granted refuge in the United States - faced new ordeals.

Some families, including at least one now in Rochester, were split up as they were being relocated. Certain family members were outside Dadaab when the verification process was held, and thus were left behind. Some men, who in their culture are allowed multiple wives, chose to stay with one spouse while the others went on.

Still other Somali Bantus remain in Kenya, their departure delayed by tight, post-9/11 security.

Only 37 have arrived in Rochester so far. Mhiji and his family were among the first.

Finding home and hope

Mhiji and his family landed on July 18 at the Greater Rochester International Airport, hungry, tired and dazed.

Masekwa got off the plane dressed in a long skirt and headscarf, her baby strapped to her body. Her two older children clomped alongside her, wearing too-big shoes and clothes that had been donated to them. Mhiji wore brilliant white jeans and a white T-shirt - favorite clothes he had bought in Kenya - and his trademark grin.

"We all just started waving, and, of course, that big smile came out," says Donna Germuga, a member of Our Lady Queen of Peace Church in Brighton, one of a network of churches involved in the Somali Bantu resettlement here.

She and other volunteers shepherded the family toward the escalator - which so befuddled the Somali Bantus that the whole group took the stairs instead. On the way out of the airport, Germuga says, Mhiji read aloud a sign overhead: "'Welcome to Rochester.'"

Mhiji and his family were halfway around the world, far away from the troubles they'd known - but facing entirely new ones. Nothing was familiar, not the language, not the landscape, not the luxuries.

For starters, volunteers say, they had to teach the refugees how to use American showers and toilets. Later, volunteers would have to take them grocery shopping - hours-long ventures into stores filled with more food than the Somali Bantus had ever seen.

Once, while driving over the Genesee River, Mhiji had to be reassured by Germuga that the churning brown water below contained no crocodiles.

"They're getting there," Germuga says seven months later, "but it's hard."

Even with the dreaded snow, the children have at times run outside barefoot, she says. The adults have seemed reluctant to use the shower, washing out of a bucket in the bathtub instead. Recently, volunteers began teaching a frustrated Mhiji how to write out a check.

But Mhiji has gotten a job, as a cook at the Sisters of Mercy motherhouse on Blossom Road in Brighton. And he has familiarized himself with the city bus system, which delivers him to work at 7 a.m. every weekday.

The kitchen crew there has grown fond of him, despite his knowledge gaps. At first, he couldn't distinguish a pickle from a cucumber or a zucchini, says one of his supervisors, Anita McConachie, and the notion of holiday pay - money for a day of no work - made no sense to him.

"It's like having a newborn around," says co-worker Terrance Grant affectionately, as Mhiji emerges from the walk-in cooler with a plastic jug of strawberries he thought was strawberry Jell-O. In Dadaab, Mhiji says, pointing to the word "Jell-O" on the lunch menu, "we don't have."

While Mhiji works, his family sticks to their own routine. His daughter, Mkundo, 7, attends School 15, where she is rapidly picking up English. Sons Hamadi, 4, and Mahamudi, 15 months, attend day care at the Rochester School District's Family Learning Center, where their mother attends classes.

The family has abandoned certain traditions, at least for now. Mhiji, who, like many other Somali Bantus, is Muslim, still prays five times a day but has not found time to visit a mosque. And his children, he laments, do not attend religious school.

Meanwhile, American culture has pervaded their household. On a recent night, Mkundo showed off her Barbie doll. Masekwa, who speaks little English, sat staring at a blaring TV and munching Pringles. Her toenails, painted a metallic pink, peeked out from under her skirt.

Mhiji still worries about his mother and twin brother, who remain in Somalia. (His father died 10 years ago.) But he revels in his newfound security. In his adopted neighborhood, he says, "I have not heard the sound of a gun."

With his fight for survival behind him, he thinks instead about the future.

"I think about the children," he says, nursing a cup of coffee before the start of his shift one morning. "Maybe they can get a good education and have a good life. Maybe they can make a lot of money and buy a big house.

"This is what I am wishing."