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A Bosnian Jordanian

Basel Smadi

AMMAN — A painting of the famous Mostar Bridge sits atop the shelves behind Nadia Bushnaq, a former senator and a social activist.

The Bosnian landmark is a reminder of her family's heritage.

Sitting in her favourite chair at her Amman home, Bushnaq remembers the days in the early 1950s when her mother and aunts would gather to make pita: a traditional Bosnian dish made of layers of pastry stuffed with spinach, cheese or meat, a dish which she still enjoys with her family to this day.

"My mom and aunts would speak in Bosnian between each other; I used to be able to understand everything they said but as time went on and the families moved further apart, the language faded away, now I can only remember a few words my mother would always repeat," Nadia said.

The last name "Bushnaq" is derived from "Bosniak" — a term given specifically to Bosnian Muslims. Most Bosnians who immigrated to the Middle East (even though they do not all come from the same family) have adopted this surname, which is basically the only connection some have to their Bosnian roots.

"Our families tried very hard to preserve our Bosnian culture and heritage; marrying outside the community wasn't very common and in the old days some men even travelled to Bosnia to choose a wife and came back to Palestine with the new brides," Bushnaq said.

"They had very good relations with the community, but they still felt the need to protect their identity. Those strong family ties were the only reason why the Bushnaqs were able to pass down some aspects of their Bosnian identity for over five generations," she further explained.

In the late 1800s, Bosniaks were concerned about the unstable situation in their country. As Muslims, they felt unsafe when the Ottoman Empire retreated and the Austro-Hungarian occupation took over their lands. Fearing a future wherein Muslims would be mistreated and abused, around 100 families decided to move to the Middle East, quickly selling all of their possessions for whatever money they could get. Nadia's grandparents were part of the group of about 50 Bosnian families that

eventually settled in Caesarea on the Palestinian coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

In 2007, Nadia's nephew, Hussein Bushnaq, arranged for a family reunion in Sarajevo with over 70 family members travelling to the Bosnian capital from throughout the world to embark on a historical journey around the country, learning more about their history and meeting their distant relatives for the first time ever.

"I didn't even know much about my own family history until I started searching two years ago," Hussein said in a lecture he gave during that family trip to Bosnia, to which *The Jordan Times* had access. "I gathered what information I could in the little free time that I had." It was not an easy task for him to learn about his family history. "There isn't a book in the public library called 'The History of Bosnians in the Arab World' because no one has ever written it."

Today, the Bushnaqs in Jordan feel fully integrated within society. Their appearance and European complexion are perhaps the only apparent distinctions they have carried with them over generations.

"This is one example that shows how Jordan is a melting pot of different ethnicities and cultures that now live together in harmony," Nadia said. "But the diverse nature of Jordan makes it easier for some minorities to go unnoticed. It is on us, however, to acknowledge and document the diversity of the society we live in," she added.

Nadia Bushnaq is a proud Jordanian and a dedicated equal rights advocate who has been serving the country for close to 40 years. She has served as a senator, was one of the first women to run for Parliament and is the founder and president of the Family Guidance and Awareness Centre in Zarqa.

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