



A French agency is determined to find homes for 5,000 Bosnians turned out of their country

Bosnians find French haven

AS THEY stepped down from their cramped bus into the dusk of a small mountain town, Nisveta Karic and her seven-year-old son Dino froze in terror when they saw the soldiers in their black berets and heavy winter boots. The little boy buried his face in his mother's lap and screamed.

"Allons, allons, regarde! C'est pour toi," said one of the soldiers, holding out some chocolate.

Nisveta, Dino and 965 other Bosnian mothers and children had just travelled the 3,000 kilometres from war-torn Bosnia-Herzegovina to the French ski resort of Chamonix at the foot of Mont Blanc.

The soldiers were *Chasseurs Alpins* - France's elite mountaineer corps stationed nearby. All of Chamonix had turned out to greet the 25-bus convoy and wish the refugees well on their way to Lyon.

"I never thought people could be so kind," said 42-year-old Nisveta in a trembling voice, now sitting in Michel and Simone Thollet's Lyon flat. Dino, the youngest of her six children, sat next to her, playing with a huge furry rabbit.

The Thollets are one of 27,000 French families who responded to a televised appeal to take Bosnian mothers and children into their homes. The programme, set up by the Lyon-based humanitarian association Equilibre, is called "1,000 Enfants à l'Abri" (A shelter for 1,000 children).

Now, after the massive response, Equilibre plans to bring out 5,000 more women and children. Véronique Vally travelled

Anne-Elisabeth Moutet • LYON

with the group on its first mission to Bosnia a month ago. "One of the most difficult parts was picking those we would take and leaving so many behind," she said.

Nisveta only qualified because her son needed medical treatment. She was still living in the comparative luxury of a small one room flat. Others were already homeless and living in temporary shelters.

When Dino arrived, Michel, a 58-year-old retired teacher, armed himself with a French/Serbo-Croat dictionary and took him and his mother to see a series of doctors. All agreed to treat the little boy for free.

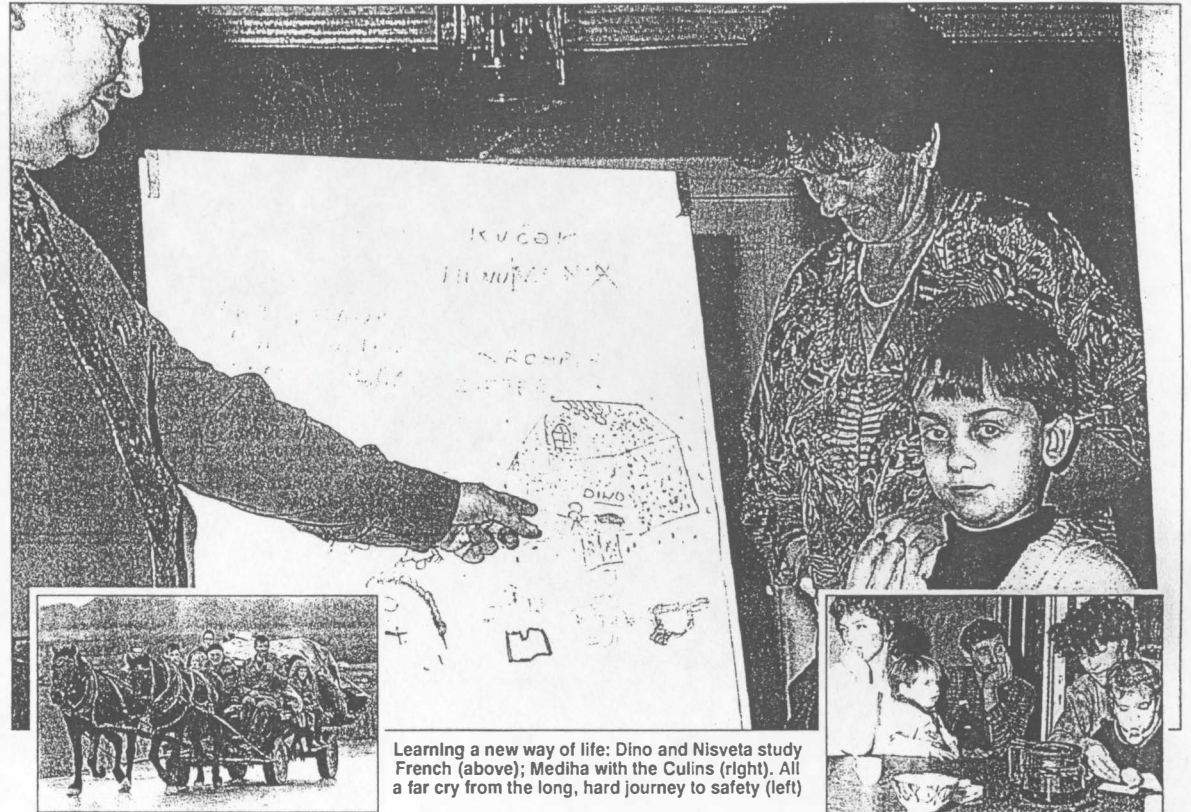
"You must put something back into society," said Michel. "When we heard the appeal, my wife and I immediately felt concerned. But to be sure we were going in with a cool head, we sat together and drew up a list of pros and cons.

He shows me the list. The plus side contains points such as "giving something in a more personal way than

just sending money" and "sharing our comfort in an immediate way". Objections include "communication problems", "insufficient psychological training to cope with the refugees' anxieties" and "learning to live together 24 hours a day". Michel commented: "In the end we realised that we had many more reasons to go ahead than to give up."

In a corner of the sitting room is a white paper board bearing a list of French and Serbo-Croat words spelt both normally and phonetically. "A habit left over from my teaching days," said Michel apologetically. Later they plan to take Nisveta and Dino skiing and then to Paris on the TGV.

Seventy kilometres north of Lyon, in Saint Nizier D'Azergues, the heart of Beaujolais country, two other Bosnian women and their children are sitting in a cosy farmhouse drinking coffee. Outside it is grey and wet. The courtyard is muddy, the brown fields drenched, and cows and



goats huddle together under a dripping corrugated iron roof.

The owners of the farmhouse, Laurence and Pierre Culin, are cheesemakers.

They took in Medihaalkanovic and her three daughters Melissa, three, Midina, six and Muharema, 12, after their Polish neighbours gave Miriana Mulacic

and her six-year-old daughter, Sandra, a home.

Miriana and Mediha were both made homeless by so-called ethnic cleansing. They had never met before the

72-hour bus journey out of the war-zone.

Miriana, a typist, is a Christian, but her husband Hassan is Muslim. He is still in Bosnia together with her other two daughters - she has had no news of them since she came to France.

"She worries all the time, and I am reluctant to tell her the latest news because it makes her even more anxious," said her hostess, Theresa. "Some days we just don't turn on the TV news."

The only thing Mediha was able to keep with her on her exodus was some of her mother's jewellery. "When the Serbs came, they made us give them all our valuables," she explained.

Her husband was in a detention camp, but was

recently released and is now in Croatia. Her parents managed to flee to Austria.

Neither of the women had papers when they fled Bosnia. Equilibre provided makeshift passports with polaroid pictures stapled to a sheet of paper stating names and particulars. These were validated by the Home Office, which gave all the refugees temporary resident permits.

The whole village has rallied round the new arrivals. Most are too young to remember the days of the Resistance, when the nearby Rhône and Ain Maquis sheltered Jews and organised their escape to Switzerland.

But the Thollets and the Cullins prove, that in Lyon at least, that spirit lives on.

Desperate plea to save the children

A CAMPAIGN to protect thousands of refugee children arriving in Europe is being launched by child welfare organisations amid fears that they will be shut out under strict new asylum laws. Write Martin Rosenbaum and Edward Buscall.

The move coincides with an appeal by the charity Oxfam to help millions of people in Europe facing acute hunger and

cold this winter. Around 2.7 million people in Yugoslavia alone are estimated to be at risk.

The European Forum for Child Welfare fears that unaccompanied child refugees, many of whom are orphans, are in danger of being expelled at national borders because they are unable to put their case across to the authorities. The

organisation wants special safeguards, such as guardians being appointed to look after minors.

At least 6,000 unaccompanied children arrived in western Europe last year. But EC immigration ministers recently agreed to introduce tighter rules on "manifestly unfounded" asylum claims involving a fast-track expulsion process. Wendy Ayoub, of the UK Children's

Legal Centre said: "Children may lie on arrival because they have only survived so far by lying. They may have destroyed their travel documents because someone told them to."

"The upshot may be their return to a third country or their country of origin, even if there is no one to care for them and the state cannot provide adequate welfare."