

# The place where God died

Melanie Poole, aged 18

## Preface

When Jostein Gaarder, author of *Sophie's World*, wrote these words, he conveyed a very important message: that 'God', being the symbol of love, compassion and benevolence, cannot be present where barbarism, persecution and injustice prevail. He saw 'God' as a spirit present only in humanity, manifested in acts of love and kindness. When Gaarder heard the stories of the detainees in the

Auschwitz concentration camp of World War II, and the horrific cruelty they had been subjected to, he was convinced that, in such circumstances, any notion of 'God' is destroyed.

Gizele Osmani is a refugee who tells a story of persecution and cruelty, of the unnecessary suffering of the innocent, of places where the qualities represented by 'God' cease to exist. Most particularly, Gizele's story reveals truths that many do not want to believe, truths about what happens to refugees in the 'lucky country'; truths that will inevitably leave the reader asking themselves what has happened to humanity.

"At Auschwitz, tell me,  
where was God?  
the answer –  
where was Man?"

## Fleeing from persecution

In 1999, Serbian soldiers marched into East Kosovo and forced Kosovo Albanian villagers out of their homes at gunpoint. Gizele Osmani, then a 29-year-old Kosovo Albanian mother of five, was washing clothes when the soldiers arrived and told her to vacate her home within 10 minutes. Terrified, she called her husband and children (aged 19 months to six years) together, and the family fled, leaving behind everything they owned.

"There was fire and gunshots and shouting ... there were bodies on the streets ... They were ... raping the women and there were screams and agonising cries coming from everywhere ... We ran and ran until it was left behind."

The family walked for six hours before reaching the house of friends who lived in Macedonia. They stayed with these friends for two nights, after which they again walked for hours to catch a bus that would take them to a refugee camp. They spent over 18 hours waiting for the bus, during which time there was no food and nothing but water to give the children.

When they reached the camp, four of the five children had developed illnesses and Gizele's youngest daughter (one of her 19-month-old twins) was found to have a dislocated hip, thought to be a result of the long journey and the hours she had spent with her legs at unnatural angles while on her mother's hip.

A doctor examined the baby and told Gizele that, unless she was operated upon, she would never walk properly. He then advised Gizele to apply to be taken to either Australia, Canada or America. Gizele applied for all three, desperate to find somewhere with adequate conditions for her children. Within several weeks, she was told she would receive temporary protection in Australia, something that filled her with overwhelming joy and relief.

"I thought to myself, 'Now my children will have a place that is safe with many opportunities for the future.' My husband and I were so happy. We thought, 'Australian people are so kind.'"

On 15th July 1999, Gizele and her family arrived by plane in Sydney, Australia. They stayed in Sydney for five days and then were taken to the Bandiana Safe Haven in Albury Wodonga. Here they met with support workers who made them feel safe and welcome and arranged for medical care for the children.

Gizele's daughter underwent three operations over 10 months, however all were unsuccessful. She was booked in for a fourth operation when suddenly the news came that the government had decided it was time for the family to be deported.

"It was war in my country. They said that it was safe now in Kosovo because the United Nations were there and we could

all go back. But we did not think it would be safe in East Kosovo. There were no United Nations there, not in our village. We had no place to go. If we went back we would be in a tent, we would have nothing. We were scared to go back."

The government refused to listen, however, and the Osmanis were told that if they did not leave Australia they would be detained. Gizele did not know what detention was, but did not think it could be worse than what her family would be forced to endure if they returned to East Kosovo.

"I thought, 'The Australian people are kind. It is good here. Nothing can be as bad as in my country.' Also, staying here was the only chance my daughter had of being able to walk again."

So the Osmani family stayed in Australia, despite the severe threats and fear tactics the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) officers used to try to convince them to leave.

"They told us that in detention everybody would hate us and try to hurt us. They say we will regret it if we do not leave. But we still think that maybe immigration will change their mind and let us stay to live."

## Seven months in hell

Immediately after Gizele and her family made it clear to immigration that they were too afraid to return to their country, they were arrested and taken to the Port Hedland Detention Centre in Western Australia. The sight that greeted them was beyond any Gizele had comprehended. "It was horrible. All desert ... no trees, no flowers. My children kept asking 'Where are we? Where are the flowers?' I could tell them nothing. They kept saying, 'We want to go. Please can we go away from here.' They kept crying and crying... It was a very, very bad place."

Gizele and her family lived in a building with 200 other people. Conditions were terrible, with poor facilities and little space. As a result, disease was rife and within days Gizele's entire family fell ill. As the detention centre was run by Australian Correctional Management (ACM), a private company, everything was done at minimum cost. The meals were meagre portions of partially cooked rice, with occasional serves of basic fruits and vegetables. To wash with, detainees were issued with bottles of chemicals labelled 'shampoo' which burned Gizele's children's scalps, and caused their hair to become brittle and dry.

The 'education' program was held in a crowded room

and taught by poorly paid, under resourced teachers. It was also selective; only 'good' children who didn't protest or cry or ask for extra food when they were hungry were allowed to be educated. There were also many times when Gizele's children were not allowed to receive education because there was not enough room or paper and pencils for them.

Within the detention centre there were 400 children and, of all the abhorrent things she witnessed, Gizele found the most heartbreaking to be seeing them deprived of nutrition, medical care, education and, most significantly, their freedom.

"How can they lock up children? How can they lock up any innocent people, but especially how can they lock up children?"

There were numerous stories of the suffering other detainees had endured whilst in detention, stories that Gizele will never forget. One particular woman from Iraq had been detained for five years and seven months. During her first month she had given birth and so her five and a half year old had grown up incarcerated, never having tasted freedom at all. Her other child, who was two years old when they arrived in Australia, could not remember anything but his time in detention. Gizele said she would never forget those two children, who suffered from depression despite their young ages, and who seldom laughed or smiled.

"The children there weren't like children I'd seen before ... Many of them had no hope ... Many wanted to die."

A constant battle that Gizele fought while in detention was for her daughter to

be re-operated on, as she was still unable to walk properly and suffered frequent pain. When Gizele finally was allowed to see a doctor, he x-rayed her daughter and Gizele, who had no medical knowledge, could see that it was quite clear that her hip was out of place. Before the doctor could talk to her, however, Gizele was escorted out of the room while ACM guards spoke to him.

When Gizele re-entered the doctor's office, she was not allowed to speak to him without the ACM guards present. The doctor – a spinal and orthopaedic specialist, turned to Gizele and said, rather nervously, "I'm afraid I don't know anything

about this. I can't help you."

Gizele could tell that the doctor was unable to speak the truth in front of the guards and so she decided she would ring him. When she requested the doctor's phone number, however, she was not allowed to have it. Gizele's daughter still cannot walk properly.

"The ACM scared everybody. They gave threats to all the kind people, all our friends. There were some nice ACM, like one woman who hugged me once. She was in a lot of trouble. They say to her, 'You are not allowed to hug these people. You cannot talk to them unless they ask you questions or you are giving orders. You must refer to them only by number, not by name.'"

Gizele recalls being told that if she asked for extra food, or talked to the media, or protested, then the government would 'blacklist' her and she would never live in Australia. Consequently most detainees were too scared to speak out though some, having reached a point of utter desperation, tried to protest against their treatment.

After seven months in detention, Marion Lé, a well known human rights lawyer, came to the aid of the Osmani family and secured permanent residence in Australia for them. Such was the Osmanis' gratitude that they decided to move to Canberra simply to be near Marion.

"This is the place that will inhabit you  
This is the place you cannot imagine  
This is the place that will finally defeat you  
Where the word why shrivels  
And empties itself."

– Margaret Atwood, *Notes Toward A Poem That Can Never Be Written*.

## Epilogue

Since being released from detention, Gizele has actively campaigned for refugee rights. She attends protest marches, writes letters to MPs and, perhaps most importantly, continues to share her experiences. "It is only through revealing truth," says Gizele, "that anything will ever be changed."

Gizele's children still suffer nightmares and have found adjusting to 'normal' life very difficult. "In Port Hedland, the guards came into our rooms at night, waking everybody to see our identification tags. They would flash their torches and yell our numbers, as though we were dogs. I used to say, 'My children are not going to run away, please let them sleep.' Now the children wake up in the night screaming, thinking that the guards are by their beds."

Gizele has not lost faith in the Australian people, however, and frequently mentions the kindness of people like Marion Lé. "I think the Australian people are mostly very kind. But I can never forgive the Australian Government. I cannot forgive the nightmares and the trauma and the suffering. Not the lies and the threats and the cruelty. No, never can I forgive that."

If Jostein Gaarder were to hear the story of Gizele Osmani, I think he would surely ask himself where – in all the talk of 'legislative framework', and 'tough border control', and 'profit margins' and 'parliamentary debate' – is humanity?

I think he would wonder what happened to those wonderful rights enshrined by the United Nations in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and The Rights of the Child, such as everyone having the right to liberty, education, and freedom of speech, and being innocent until proven guilty.

Like most of us, he would probably wonder 'why'; and, like most of us, would probably find no answer.