



For my father and my family,

Thank you for teaching me  
to never settle and to chase  
my wildest dreams.



## FOREWORD:

paratienne libri.

# WILDEST DREAMS

**M**y name is Stephanie Pepaj and I had the pleasure of being put on this earth with the beautiful people pictured to the left. On the left is my mother, Lorraine, who is holding my four-year-old self. Next to us stands my father, Tony, who is holding my younger brother Joseph. Somehow, my father, who was born oceans away, met my mother and they soon became four.

The thought of how we end up where we are has always fascinated me. The way I think of it, moments are weaved together by the universe to place us exactly where we are supposed to be. The fascination of the beauty that life has to offer has led me to dive deep into my family history. My curiosity has motivated me to uncover many interesting things about where my family is from along with what I'm made up of. My mother was born in Whitestone, Queens and is the youngest of five. Her grandmother (my great grandmother) is from Germany and immigrated here with when she was 17 and had my grandma and my great uncles.

Growing up, my father's immigration story was a puzzle. He would tell me bits of the narrative throughout the past years but there were always missing pieces; I wanted and needed more information. Finally, after research and many interviews, the puzzle is complete and it is my inspiration for this book.





Tushi boarding the plane to go To New York,  
he barely had anything to take with him.  
Tushi hipi në aeroplan për të shkuar në New York,  
ai mezi kishte ndonjë gjë për të marrë me vete.

# “Were you scared? Never. *NEVER.*”

Oftentimes in life, fear gets in way. It shoves a big stop sign in the way of our dreams. It appears as our biggest enemy, a monster, or a scary thing. Whether the fear is irrational, small, or large in scale, we can't help but link negative connotations to it. We tend to mark fear as the beginning of something potentially disastrous, yet in reality, fear is an old friend. It is the top of a really exciting roller coaster, knowing there's a drop but that you'll be okay after. Fear is a marker of change, and change is always good in my opinion. My father, Tony, embraced fear when he immigrated to America. He left his family behind and everything that was familiar to him. He looked fear in the face and said,

...let's take a journey together.”

*Journey together.”*

Brekoc, Kosovo





# KOSOVO

## KOSOVO

### KOSOVO

1948–1966

Kosovo, a beautiful landlocked country located in the Balkan region of Europe. It is diverse and small. The self-declared, independent country tightly borders Serbia (North), Albania (West), and Montenegro (Northwest). Kosovo presents its beauty with its mountainous terrain, limestone caves, and rolling hills. The main languages spoken in this region are Albanian and Serbian. It is very diverse in the sense that it is home to many different religions and ethnicities. Although Kosovo is peaceful today, it was not that way when my father was growing up. Kosovo was once part of Yugoslavia and the quality of life was below average.

# GRANDPA, GRANDMA, AND TUSHI

**M**y father, Tushi Pepaj was born in Brekoc, Kosovo on July 18, 1948. He was born to his parents Sokol Pepaj and File Pepaj and is the eldest of nine siblings. His Father, Sokol (my grandfather) was deployed for WWII for four years. When he got back from the war he had an arranged marriage with my grandmother. My grandmother, File Pepaj grew up on a farm and would sew for her family from a young age to prepare herself for her future marriage. Arranged marriages were normal in the mid-forties in Kosovo and for many years to follow. How the arrangement worked was that the father of the bride would pay the father of the groom

*“My father, Tushi Pepaj  
was born in Brekoc,  
Kosovo on July 18, 1948”*

and the engagement would begin two years prior to the wedding date. It was very planned out and formal, closely resembling a business deal. The couple wouldn't be able to see each other until their wedding day. During the timespan of engagement, the woman would spend her days making clothing for herself, her future husband, and her future children. When my grandfather came back from the war he married my grandmother and had their first child, Tushi.





# August 18 1958

Tony / August 18, 1958 / Brekoc, Kosovo

## ON THE FARM

When my father was growing up in Brekoc, Kosovo his family was very poor. They lived on large farm on the acres of land they owned. This farm was their life support- it fed them, gave them shelter, and all things necessary to survive. It was filled with various vegetables, flowers, herbs, and fruit. Plums were turned into brandy, which was a popular commodity for the men. Wheat and tobacco flowed through the fields. My father remembers picking the tobacco and rolling it into cigarettes for his dad. They also had farm animals such as goats, pigs, sheep, and cows which would be used for materials and meat. The sheep would provide the family with cotton and leather to make shoes, clothing, and blankets. The goats and cows would be used for meat and dairy products. One of my father's chores was to help his mother make butter and cream. They did not have a refrigerator or freezer. The attic would act as a preservation storage where they would put vegetables and fruits in hay to keep ripe for the winter months. As for the meat, they would put it in a sack, tie a rope to the sack, and lower it into the well, allowing it to hang just above the water. This process would ensure that the meat would stay cold and preserved during the warm summer months.

“The sheep would provide the family with cotton and leather to make shoes, clothing, and blankets.”

“Delet do t'i siguronin familjes pambuk dhe lëkurë për të bërë këpucë, veshje dhe bataniqe.”



Sokol Pepaj (left), Tushi Pepaj (Right)



Një fotografi e gjyshit tim Sokol  
A photo of my grandpa Sokol



# HOME. SHTËPI.

“My father remembers picking the tobacco and rolling it into cigarettes for his dad and growing plums, turning it into a plum brandy which was a favorite among the older men in the village.”



ujton marrjen  
dhe rrotullimin  
në cigare për babin e  
e kumbulla në rritje,  
duke e kthyer atë në një raki  
kumbulle e cila ishte një  
preferuar në mesin e pleqve  
në fshat.”

My father lived in a house made of mud and wood with no electricity. When it would rain, the water would flow through the house, flooding the floors and under his bed. There was **one large bed** in the home he grew up in. The structure was made of wood, layered with hay and topped with blankets handmade by my grandmother. My father shared this bed with his mother, father, five brothers, and three sisters. It was cramped and uncomfortable, but back then he did not know any better. These living conditions were considered normal. Since Kosovo is considered a **third world country**, this was unfortunately the common household set up for many. The people of Kosovo were doing their best to stay warm in the winter months; to stay full and survive. Luckily, when the farm would freeze over, they had access to all of their produce and meat because they had stored their surplus from the summer. This was one of the reasons why my father loved the winter, despite the cold weather.

Tush with his parents, Sokel and Fide Pepaj when he came back to visit home after escaping to America.



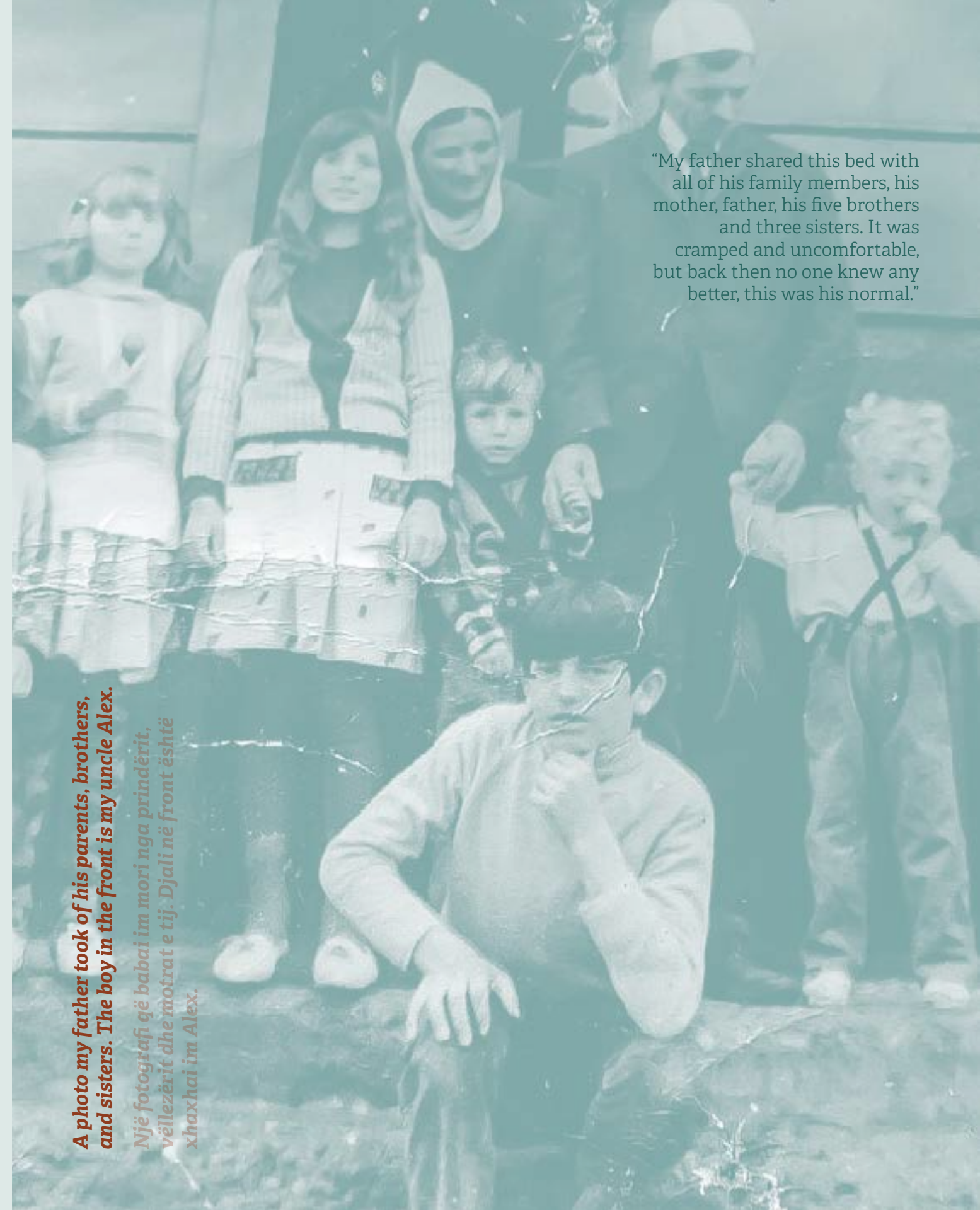
# EVERY MORNING.

**E**very morning his mother would wake up and cook cornbread for her children. After eating, my father would then meet up with his cousins and friends to head to the field near their home with a soccer ball. The majority of my father's neighbors consisted of his family members because families typically lived walking distance from each other. They would end up playing soccer until dusk. Soccer in Brekoc, and in most of European countries, was a "religion." It was a way to escape the hardships that everyone in the village was facing. They would play during the winter months as well, clearing the snow to make room for the ball to travel. Besides soccer, working on the farm, and school, my father would go fishing and diving in a nearby river with his friends for fun.

"Soccer in Brekoc and in most of Europe was a religion, it was a way to escape the hardships everyone in the village were facing."



A photo of Tushi with his classmates in Brekoc, Kosovo 1956.



"My father shared this bed with all of his family members, his mother, father, his five brothers and three sisters. It was cramped and uncomfortable, but back then no one knew any better, this was his normal."

A photo my father took of his parents, brothers, and sisters. The boy in the front is my uncle Alex.

Një fotografi që babai im mori nga prindërit, vëllezërit dhe motrat e tij. Djali në front është xhaxhai im Alex.



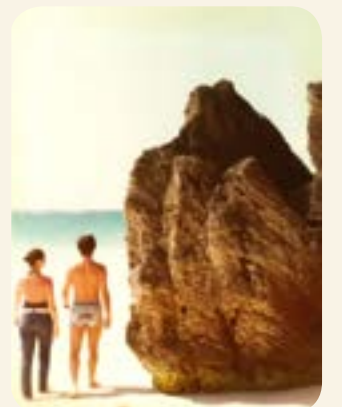
"My father lost control diving from a flimsy tree branch and fell into shallow waters, scraping the skin off of half of his skull."

"Babai im humbi kontrollin e zhytjes nga një degë e pemëve të hidhura dhe ra në ujëra të cekëta, duke hequr lëkurën nga gjysma e kafkës së tij".

# HE WOULD DIVE

Tony / July 15, 1962 / Brekoc, Kosovo

He would dive from cliffs, town bridges, high trees; it became a hobby at age twelve. In his village, kids went off to play unsupervised on their own. One day, my father lost control diving from a flimsy tree branch and fell into shallow waters, scraping the skin off of half his skull. When my dad came up from the water all he could see was blood running down his head, in front of his eyes. He quickly wrapped his cousin's t-shirt around his head, hopped onto his favorite horse, and road until he reached the first aid. The first aid put sugar on his wound to help it heal. Every injury, cut, broken bone, or burn would take twice as long to heal compared to other more developed countries around Brekoc, Kosovo at this time because of their limited resources and primitive healing techniques.





# LIKE A HAWK

**K**osovo at this time was dangerous because you had to constantly be on your toes, even with family members; there was a lot of evil in the town and people would kill senselessly to get back at you. There was not enough resources in his village and around it to learn, and so many people could not spell their own name or read.

A lot of disputes would be held over the land my grandfather had, that was passed down to him. It was a rich, vast land perfect for farming. Since the land was so valuable, people would often target my father since he was the oldest male in the family. On the topic of this land, my father's cousins tried to kill him. They dragged him by a rope, through their field and

choked him; he eventually broke free. My grandfather had another discrepancy with his neighbor using many swear words in the midst of this dispute; in the late 50's in Kosovo swearing was forbidden, it was even considered a crime. It was considered such a crime that, people would often kill you for this behavior. After the dispute, instead of attaining revenge through my grandfather, the neighbor's went after my father; again, the eldest son. A direct blow was not the way these arguments were settled, they would often go after blood, such as close family members. The neighbors children would hide in the woods and watch my father go to and from school everyday. To stay safe, my grandfather had my father's cousin walk beside him everyday for two months with a large, sharp stick. This was to ensure they could never go near him; his cousin was bigger, older and stronger.

*"There was a lot of evil in the town and people would kill senselessly to get back at you."*



A photo of Tushi (left) and his best friend (right) and next door neighbor, before school.

*Një foto e Tushi dhe shoku i tij më i mirë dhe fqinji tjetër, para shkollës.*

*"Kishte shumë të keqe në qytet dhe njerëzit do të vrisnin pa kuptim që të ktheheshin te ti."*



# SCHOOL. SHKOLLË.

School was a significant experience in my father's life growing up in Kosovo. His commute to school was an average of 1.5 miles starting at age 6. He would walk through harsh winters, in shoes with many holes, in rain, and through shine. Many of his classmates were in a similar situation, because everyone was poor and they all could relate to each other in this way. His classmates had eyes, fingers, and toes missing, this was because the children in the village would play deep into the woods, running into leftover land mines from world war II. Unfortunately, this was never a surprise to anyone because it was an everyday occurrence.

After coming back from the war, my grandfather worked as a janitor at the school my father attended. After my father's classes, he would often help him clean the floors and tidy up. He didn't mind helping him out, it was a rewarding chore giving his

father a helping hand. There was no heat in my father's school and so the winter months, after walking miles to school, were unbearable. Along with the school being unbearably cold, the teachers made his school experience nothing short of a nightmare. The teachers were rough, strict, and worked alongside the uncompromising government. They would often use physical abuse as a way of disciplining the children; my father experienced this abuse in the classroom growing up. They would hit his hands with a ruler sixty times in a row if he misbehaved or did not hand in his homework. Another form of abuse was having him stand in the back of the room on one foot for an hour straight, facing the wall. There was no mercy for anyone and if the rules were disobeyed the teachers, both male and female, would often beat you.



"After coming back from the war, my grandfather worked as a janitor at the school my father attended."



Fotot e klasës së Tushi gjatë gjithë viteve.  
Class photos of Tushi throughout the years.





My father remembers being one of the first few people in town to get a radio transmitter. Everyone in the village would come over and listen to the radio to see what was happening outside of their little village of Brekoc. My father remembers his mother being terrified of it, she would accuse the voice of belonging to the devil.



A photo of my father growing out his hair at his home in Brekoc.  
Një foto e babait tim duke rritur flokët në shtëpinë e tij të Brekocit.

# CLOTHING, SUGAR, EXTRA SHOES

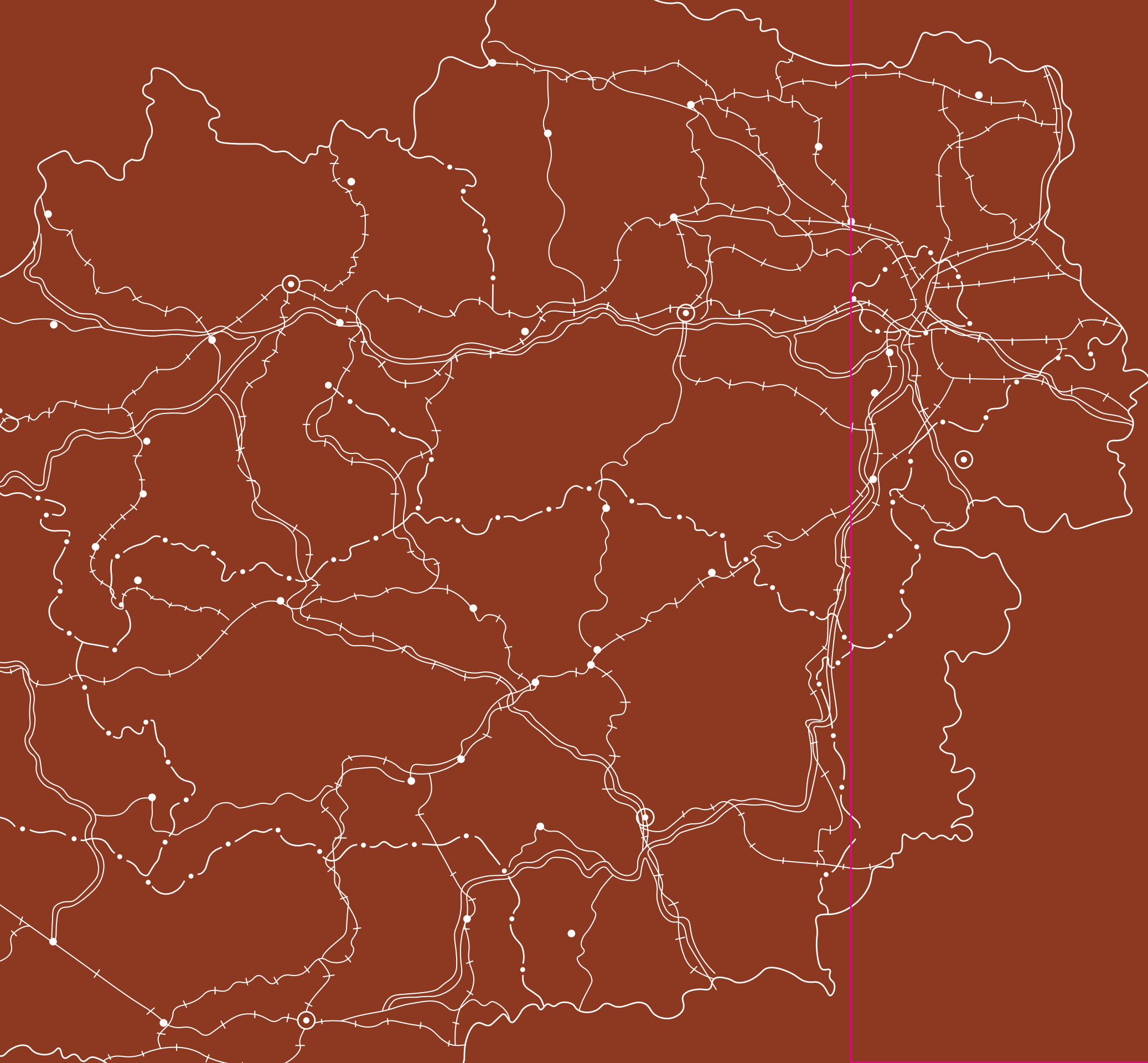
In 1963, when president John F. Kennedy was killed, my father was the first of his family to hear the news. He heard the story at school and after school, he journeyed to the movie theater in his village to see the footage of what had happened in America. No one had TV so this is how people would get informed. The village of Brekoc was very upset when they heard the news because JFK was an important figure in Kosovo and Yugoslavia as a whole At the time. He was so important that his picture would hang in churches across the village of Brekoc. He was valued because of the help he would bring to the country, America catholic churches would often send over clothing, sugar, and extra shoes. Sugar at this time was hard to find and there was a shortage of clothing and shoes. My father remembers being ecstatic on the days he was able to pick up clothing from the church for himself and his family.

From that day on, he was interested in America and wanted to read and learn everything he could about the country. He was unable to do this because books on western culture were forbidden. The government, under Tito's reign, did not want people reading this information. To get around this ban, my father would venture underground to get books from the catholic church in Austria and from smugglers; if you were found with this information you would be put in jail, kicked out of school or even worse killed. With his new-found knowledge, he was preparing himself for America, he watched American movies, grew his hair out (which was against school rules), and listened to a lot of Elvis Presley. He was ready.



He was ready.  
He was ready.





# AUSTRIA

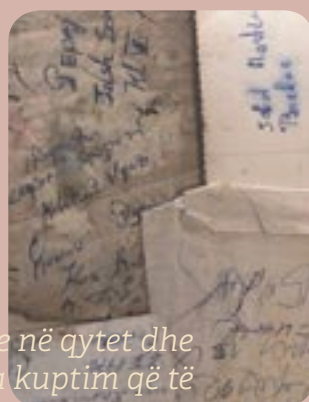
Vienna  
wien

1966 – 1967

Austria, a beautiful country located in central Europe, Austria is bordered by Germany, Czech Republic, Slovenia, Italy, and Switzerland. The native people speak Bavarian dialects, but German is the country's standard language. It's terrain is mountainous and has a similar look to Kosovo, making it a familiar, temporary home to my father for a few months between the years 1966 and 1967. His time in Austria was spent with his cousin Ndu and it was here that he contemplated his quality of life back home in Kosovo. Austria, along with Italy, was the conversation **inbetween his two homes**, Kosovo and America. It was the first stepping stone in his journey.

## 30 DAY VISA

**M**y father started to plan his voyage to America at age 16, and so he began to write letters to his cousin Ndu in Vienna, Austria, urging him to take him in. Ndu was much older than him and had a place where my father could stay. Soon, after many letters back and forth, my father went to the authority in Kosovo to ask for a visa to visit his cousin temporarily in Austria. The government issued him a visa to live Austria for 30 days. He was able to get this visa so easily because he was under the age of 18, and once he turned 18 he would be forced to join the army and dedicate his time. My father was at the perfect age to begin his journey. Once he arrived in Austria, he worked in construction for awhile, but soon quit because he was so young and it was hard labor with long hours. Along with strenuous work, it was not a passion of his either, he knew there was something bigger and better out there for him.



*"Kishte shumë të keqe në qytet dhe njerëzit do të vrisnin pa kuptim që të ktheheshin te ti."*

**"He was at the perfect age to begin his journey."**



*"Something bigger and better"*

A photo of my father right before his departure from Kosovo to Austria.

Një fotografi e babait tim para largimit të tij nga Kosova në Austri.



Tony / April 04, 1967 / Vienna, Austria

# THE SECOND TRIP

“Gjatë vizitës së tij të dytë në Austri, ai po planifikonte kjen e tij në Amerikë me rrugët e planifikuara dhe ëndrrat e mëdha.”

He went back to Kosovo after his 30-day Visa was up and ended up going back for another 30 days to visit again. During his second visit to Austria, he was planning his escape to America with planned routes and big dreams. He was waiting until he was 18 to escape to Rome, at this time he was 17. Once he finished his schooling after the second visa he asked the government for another visa for Austria for a third and final time. They gave him only six weeks to live in Austria, reason being, his 18th birthday was right around the corner, which would bind him to the land. He finished school in June and ventured straight to Austra. Since the government was forcing him and others to join the army, it was critical he began his advances to America. His plan was a secret and so his family back in Kosovo had no idea he was planning to defect and leave for the states.

“ During his second visit to Austria, he was planning his escape to America with planned routes and big dreams.”





# ROME

*Italy*  
Rome

1968 – 1969

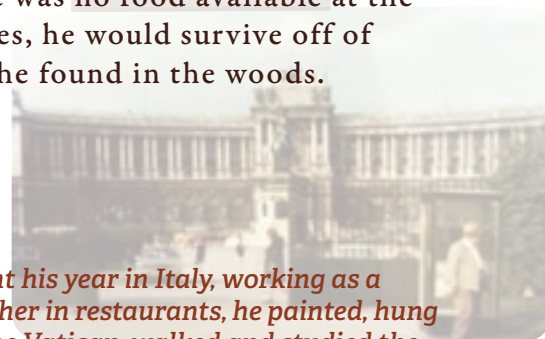
taly, a romantic, old, history-filled European country with excess amounts of flavorful dishes and beautiful art. It lives below and borders; Switzerland, France, Austria, and Slovenia. Italy, being a unique peninsula, shares the same body of water as Albania, the Adriatic Sea. Italy is **captivating** because it is made up of various different landscapes, ranging from rugged mountains, deep valleys, and long beaches. Rome, as my father describes it, is one of the most thrilling and beautiful cities. Providing my father with a home for just shy of a year, Italy issued my father **rich history**, recipes, and a ton of strength.



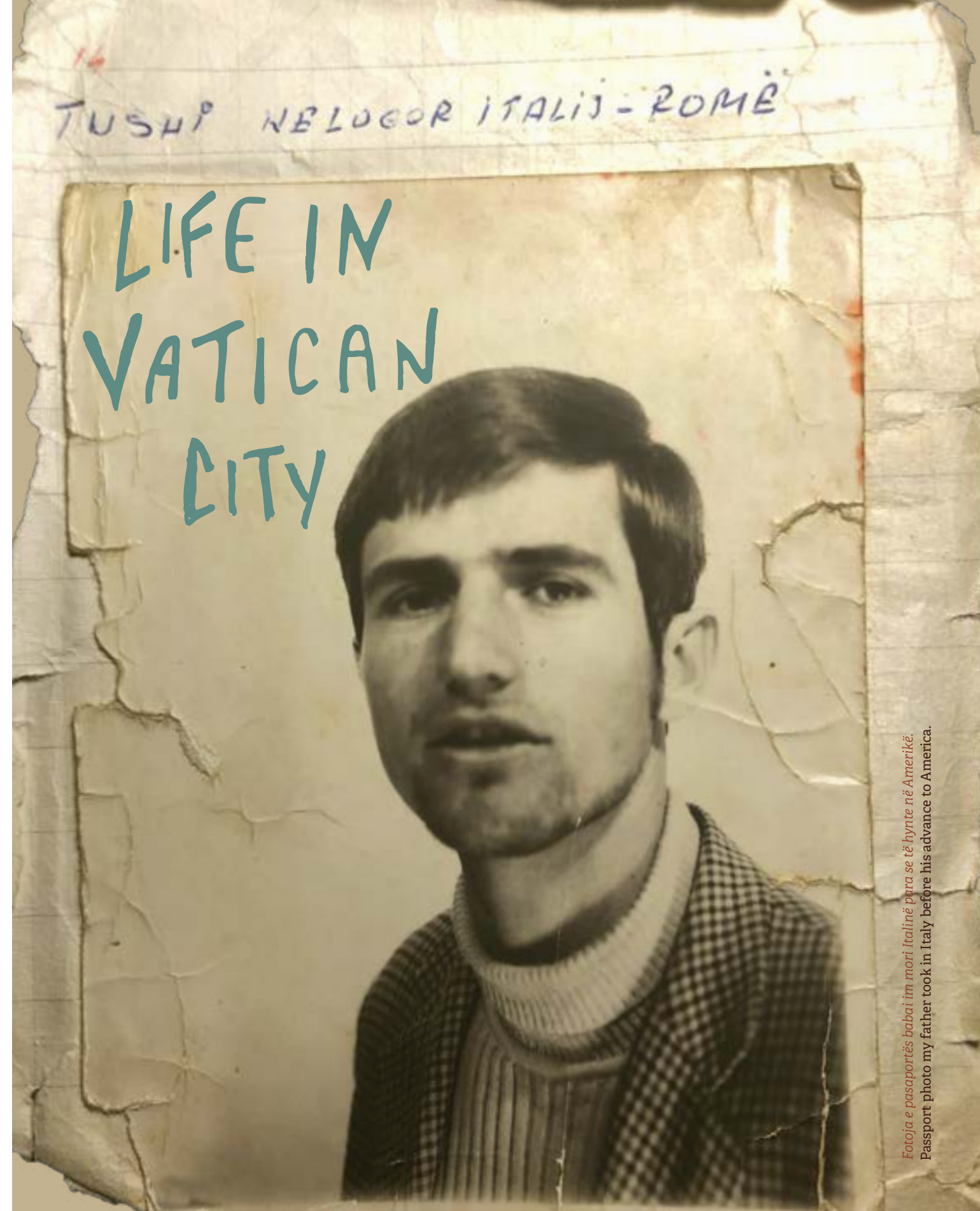
For his third and final visa request, my father told the government he was visiting his cousin one last time before entering the military. Instead of traveling to Vienna, he went to Rome, Italy. When he first arrived in Italy, his first move was to find the nearest church for shelter. He came across a building ran by nuns in Vatican City that housed refugees. He approached them and explained his plans to leave Kosovo for America and informed them of the harsh government; they took him in and gave him a place to sleep with two meals a day. Once he was settled, my father went to the American Embassy in Rome to get sponsored by a family to go to New York. The Embassy told him to wait 11 months to go to New York. They offered him a wait of one month for Australia, because Australia needed refugees for work; he declined and said he was set on going to New York.

Life living with the nuns in the dormitory in Vatican City was by no means luxurious or comfortable. Each morning the nuns would kick himself and the other refugees out at 6:00 am, sharp. My father would receive his food ration once he prayed for 15 minutes in Italian. (He

did not speak Italian when he came to Italy, but by the time he left he was fluent.) Dinner had the same set up; his curfew was 9:00 pm, he would pray for 15 minutes before receiving dinner, go to sleep, and repeat. These were some of the hardest months of his life and my father lost a lot of weight. He spent his 11 months in Italy, working as a dishwasher in restaurants, painting, hanging out at the Vatican, walking and studying the streets of Rome. Sometimes his cousin Ndu in Austria would send him money, and he would take that money and go to the movies and watch American films, especially when it was cold outside. He would stay and watch the same movie three times to pass time until he was allowed back in the dormitory. Since he was only fed breakfast and dinner, during the day he would visit the churches around Italy to get free food from the nuns. At times, he would try to trick the nuns by visiting the same church twice in one day for food. The nuns would greet his presence with, "no more for you, you were already here today." If there was no food available at the churches, he would survive off of apples he found in the woods.



"He spent his year in Italy, working as a dishwasher in restaurants, he painted, hung out at the Vatican, walked and studied the streets of Rome, and went to the cinema often where he would view American films."



Fotoja e pasaportës babai im mori Italianë para se të hynte në Amerikë.  
Passport photo my father took in Italy before his advance to America.

TUSHI NE BLOCOR ITALI - ROME



"Pure joy radiated from him as he boarded the plane to New York on Alitalia on April 13, 1969."

# HOME SICK



The moments leading up to my father's departure from Italy to the United States.

Çastet që çojnë në largimin e babait tim nga Italia në Shtetet e Bashkuara.

One day he got home sick and went to visit his father and mother, at his cousin's house in Austria; this was their middle ground, the meeting place. It was hard to make this trip back to Vienna because he had defected and went to Rome instead of Austria and, most importantly, my father turned 18 and never went back to Kosovo to serve in the military. He had to be stealthy with his moves, and so when he got on the train to go to Vienna, he snuck into the bathroom of the cart. It was imperative to him that he did not get caught because his sponsorship in America would be jeopardized.

When he met with his parents at his cousin's home, he was crying, hugging, reminiscing, and informed them he was going to America. This trip was the first time they became aware of his plans to immigrate. On the way back to Rome from visiting his parents in Vienna, the conductor asked my father to check his passport. He told the conductor that he had lost his passport and they still let him on the train; today, that would not be allowed. When his 11 month wait in Rome was up, my father got on the plane that would take him to the land where all his child and adolescent dreams would come true; New York, New York. Pure joy radiated from him as he boarded the plane to New York on Alitalia on April 13, 1969.



“ Seeing New York from my window seat on the plane, seeing all the lights below; it was the best feeling in my life. I was so happy nothing else mattered, who I left behind, how much food I had in my stomach. My happiness distracted me from everything, I could not eat for days and not notice because nothing else mattered, I made it.

Were you scared?  
Never.”

I MADE IT





# AMERICA

*New York*  
*America*

## 1969 – Today

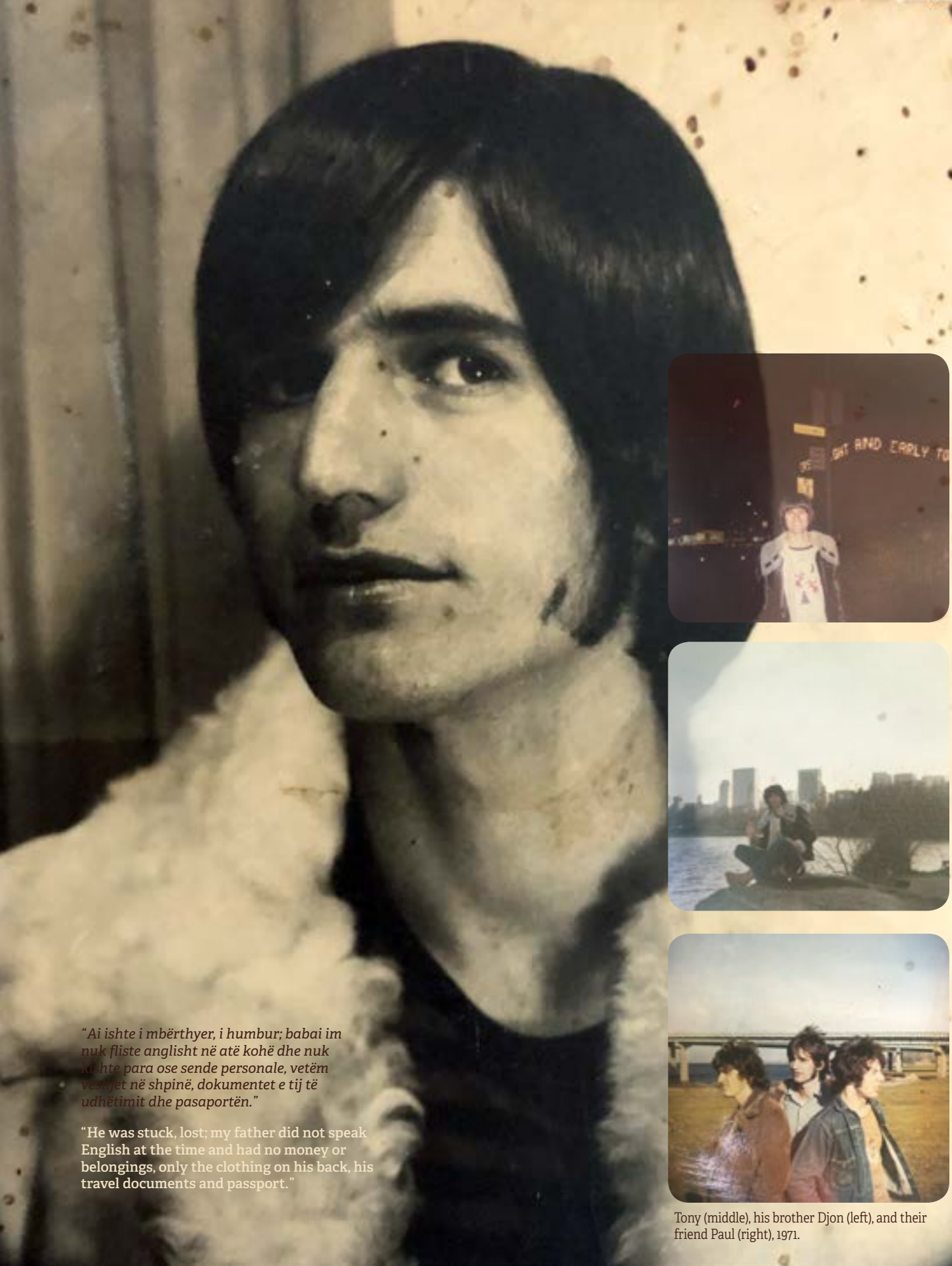
America, my home, the most familiar thing to me, a free country, and most importantly, my father's dream. It was here that brought him buckets of happiness, a family, and his career. He traveled around the country, from the west, to the east. Some of his favorite things / experiences in America included; burgers, California, Woodstock, celebrating birthdays, rock and roll, new york fashion; freedom.



# FIRST IMPPRESSIONS

His first impression of New York was just how he thought it would be, it was like being reborn. His arrangements for when he arrived in America were quite simple, well, so it seemed. Since my dad was sponsored through the Catholic Church in Italy by a family in America, the immigration office in Italy informed him that the family would wait for him at JFK with a sign that had his name on it. As soon as he got his baggage he was searching for hours, waiting, panicking, looking around for the family that was supposed to meet him at the airport in New York City. They were no where to be found and neither was the sign that was supposed to read “Pepaj.” He was stuck, my father did not speak English at the time and had no money or belongings, only the clothing on his back, his travel documents and passport. Finally, a light began to shine bright at the end of the tunnel. After walking around the airport for hours, asking the police for help and many other people, my dad came across an Italian family. He went up to them

and explained his situation; they offered to help him and take him in. He went back to the Bronx with the family and after a few days they were kind enough to get him his own apartment and his first job in America. Feeling grateful, my father repaid them after a month and a half of being at his new job. His first job in America was a cleaner in an office building on third Ave on the east side of Manhattan; it wasn’t glamorous. He cleaned twenty bathrooms a night, his shift started at 10 pm and ended at 6 am, it was the graveyard shift. He would make \$130 a week and in the early 70’s, that was plenty of money to support himself. Another reason my father left Kosovo, along with wanting freedom from the harsh government, was to make money for his family while in America. When he arrived in New York he was the main financial support system for his family. From the start, out of every \$130 paycheck he would send \$80 back to Kosovo and kept \$50 for himself. This made his family very happy, because it covered the expenses and gave them enough money to spend on fun, something that would rarely happen before my father immigrated.



“Ai ishte i mbërthyer, i humbur; babai im nuk fliste anglisht në atë kohë dhe nuk kishte para ose sende personale, vetëm vetë jet në shpinë, dokumentet e tij të udhëtimit dhe pasaportën.”

“He was stuck, lost; my father did not speak English at the time and had no money or belongings, only the clothing on his back, his travel documents and passport.”



Tony (middle), his brother Djon (left), and their friend Paul (right), 1971.



# TUSHI → TONY

In 1969, being an immigrant came with some discrimination. Of course, in the first few months that followed his arrival to New York, Tony did not have the America look. He wore a leather jacket, had a sharp, clean haircut accompanied with a heavy accent and broken English; people were very aware that he was not from around the block. His appearance became a danger to himself during his late night commutes on the D-train. He remembers vividly having very close near death experiences from people following him, chasing him down the street with knives, trying to rob him. He learned fast that he needed to give the American look at try. He grew his hair out long to fit the hippie look of the time and wore clothes that were trending in New York. People stopped following him because of this change.

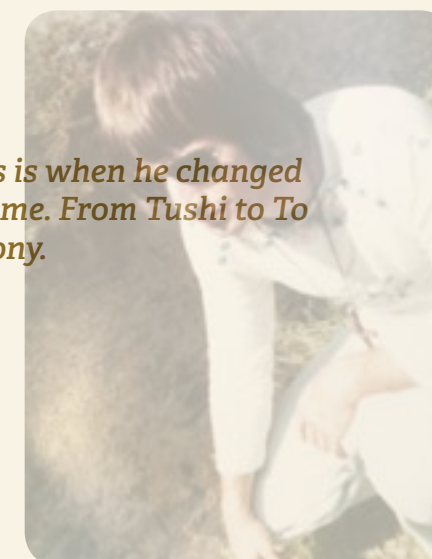
His early days in Manhattan were spent exploring each borough, each subway line and avenue. He would ride trains and buses to see where he could end up, to see more of his new home. After awhile, it became apparent that his current situation and living in the Bronx

was not what he envisioned when he dreamed of immigrating to America. This realization made him begin to make his next move, yet he was confused on how to make any moves without a license or the knowledge on how to drive. The last thing he drove was a horse. One day he went to the DMV to get his citizenship and license. When the receptionist at the DMV asked for his full name he nonchalantly informed them that it was Tushi Pepaj. Short, sweet, and exotic. The ladies at the front desk of the DMV were overcome with laughter. My father was confused and did not understand what was so funny to them. He asked someone in line the reason for the outburst and the person responded with, “Tushi means your ass,”

*Një fotografi e Alex, vëllai më i vogël i babait tim (majtas), Toni (mes), dhe shoku i tij Pali (djathtas). Kjo ishte kur babai im e solli së pari Alexin vëllain e tij nga vendi i vjetër.*

A photo of Alex, my father's younger brother (left), Tony (middle), and his friend Paul (right). This is when my father first brought his brother Alex over from the old country.

— this is when he changed his name. From Tushi to To NY; Tony.





“He got off the bus near Whitestone and was immediately compelled not to go back to his home in the Bronx.”

FAKE IT UNTIL  
YOU MAKE IT



*“Ai u largua nga autobusi pranë Whitestone dhe u detyrua menjëherë të mos kthehej në shtëpinë e tij në Bronx.”*

One day, he accidentally took the wrong train from the Bronx and ended up in Flushing, Queens. Since he was already lost, he thought, why not make it an adventure? He jumped on another. This second bus took to Whitestone and once his feet hit the pavement, my father was immediately compelled not to go back to his home in the Bronx. The irony is that where he ended up was down the street from where my mother grew up. He began to walk the streets of Whitestone, eventually making it to an Italian bakery for food. He began a conversation with the owner in Italian, the owner asked my father where he was from and what he was doing in the area. This conversation eventually led to a job offer and the owner gave him a job as a pizza boy at a restaurant named Riviera located two doors down. Do you know how to make pizza? The owner of Riviera asked him. “I know a little, I lived in Italy for a year, you just have to show me to remind me.” My dad did not have prior knowledge in the art of pizza making, but his motto during these early years in America was, “Fake it until you make it.”



## HIS OWN BIGGEST FAN

That is exactly what my father did, throughout his years in New York. He climbed the restaurant ladder as a chef, starting out as a pizza boy at Riviera, going on to study the art of French, American, and Italian cuisines under esteemed chef's in Manhattan, eventually making it big himself becoming a five-star chef. He found his passion through food, creating new recipes and restaurants. He took his passionate personality with him throughout his travels, to every place he has been, and to every interaction. From Kosovo, to Austria, Italy, and New York he met amazing human beings from all around, learned a thing or two about life, and became his own biggest fan. He fell in love with rock and roll, McDonald's, and Shedding every layer of doubt, my father allowed for his life to blossom into something that was once unimaginable. There was never a question for any situation because he believed that every thing was exactly as it should be. He has inspired me to be fearless in the pursuit of living a full and happy life. Thank you.



*"Nga Kosova, në Austri, Itali dhe Nju Jork, babai im u takua me njerëz të mahnitshëm nga të gjitha anët, mësoi një ose dy gjëra rreth jetës dhe u bë tifoz i tij më i madh."*

*"From Kosovo, to Austria, Italy, and New York, my father met amazing human beings from all around, learned a thing or two about life, and became his own biggest fan."*



