

THE WONDROUS ADVENTURES OF THE OMEROVIC FAMILY

Presentation: Chris Bajema and Jair Stein

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Clip from NOS LAAT (*Dutch current affairs program*):

Masses of people displaced. For a million Yugoslavian refugees there is no room, and Europe turns a blind eye.

Since World War II, Europe hasn't seen anything like it: so many people fleeing from war. Leaving everything behind, going... nowhere. The civil war in Yugoslavia set an unprecedented stream of refugees on the move.

Chris: This is the war in Yugoslavia. When was it... I don't remember exactly... early nineties, right?

Jair: Yes. This is exactly twenty years ago, during the Serbian army's siege of the Bosnian city of Sarajevo. The number of people who flee the fighting is unfathomable. And ten thousand Bosnians came to the Netherlands.

Clip from Dutch nightly news:

The refugees will remain here for two days. Here in Zeewolde, they are primarily catching their breath. After a medical check, most refugees slept the whole afternoon. In fact they were just woken up for dinner.

Jair: In the early days, it was total chaos. Refugees were housed in asylum-seeker centres. They were given clothes, food and spending money. Things that everyone is happy to receive...

Chris: I see that you're smiling a little bit. Everyone? So, not really everyone...

Jair: Well... *almost* everyone. There's one young family that doesn't want to make use of the Dutch hospitality.

Adi: Asylum... That's something that makes you think of Africa. For us it sounded like... going to prison. You don't want that!

Chris: This is...?

Jair: This is Adi Omerovic.

Adi: I can fight for myself and work for myself and do everything else, but I'm not doing that. No asylum!

Jair: His wife Narcisa was just as determined.

Narcisa: I had fights with the Department of Immigration. Yes... what I said to that lady: "Look, you have to imagine that you're in my position, and I'm at the other side, in your place. What would you do? I can't just sit here and vegetate! I'm not a plant! With a label that says 'Water twice a week, a little sunlight, shade, winter, summer...' I'm not a number!

Chris: She's... she's not a plant? She's not a number... what exactly does she mean?

Jair: They just don't want to waste away in some kind of refugee centre, lose their identity and wait there passively. They think: "We're young, we can work, and have no interest in any government handouts." It just didn't feel good to them.

Narcisa: I would have no respect for myself. I would think badly of myself. Me living... at someone else's expense...

Chris: They didn't want to live on the expense of the Dutch government. But am I right in assuming they weren't millionaires, either?

Jair: No, in fact, they had left everything behind in Sarajevo. They arrived here with literally nothing. But their principles were very strong. They didn't want any help. They didn't want to go to an asylum-seeker centre. They even refused a refugee status!

Chris: What? But that never happens, does it? Not that I can imagine.

Jair: No. We even checked that with immigration. Nobody does that. I mean, nobody. Normally people line up to get that status. And the lady from the immigration department, well she got a little...

Chris: Pissed off?

Jair: Exactly. Insulted.

Narcisa: "It's good for everyone, only it's not good for you. Who are you?" I said: "I'm just a human being. No one special, no one in particular. But I'm just going to sit in the hallway." And she went back and forth and she looked at me. And I said: "I'm waiting for the boss." She said: "He has no time for you." I said: "I'll wait. I've got nothing but time."

Chris: She waits... they're very persistent. But did they succeed?

Jair: They're indeed very stubborn people, as you will see. And yes, they succeeded. They were allowed to stay. And that set them down a path that is so exceptional, that you could even call it an experiment.

What happens if you try to survive in the Netherlands without any form of government support? How much help do you need from other people? And most importantly: how creative do you have to be to survive?

Chris: This is *Plots*, with wondrous, true stories on one theme.

Jair: Today's broadcast is all about this one family: the Omerovic family. A family that reinvents itself time and again, and has been through so much that it's hard to imagine that it fits into a single lifetime.

Chris: But our broadcasts are normally on a single theme. So what's the theme this time?

Jair: Actually, there's more than one theme. So we thought of another title. We call it "The Wondrous Adventures of the Omerovic Family." And those adventures, by the way, began before even earlier, before the family arrived in the Netherlands.

Chris: A story by Jennifer Pettersson and Jair Stein.

Jair: Keep listening...

Sfx: Sound of bombardment of Sarajevo

Voice: Chapter one: TOURISTS

Sfx: Sounds of war

Ena: I remember that the television towers, they were bombed. And I was watching from the kitchen window. But I just found it very fascinating.

VO: This is Ena, daughter of Adi and Narcisa. She's five years old when the war in Bosnia breaks out in 1992. The family lives in a small apartment in the middle of Sarajevo. They don't want to simply walk away from their home, their work and their country, so they stay in the city. But that becomes increasingly difficult. There are snipers, and during the shelling they have to take shelter in their neighbour's basement. Finally, the situation becomes untenable.

Ena: And then, my father burst into the house and said: Come on, hurry up, we're going! Sarajevo's last bus is leaving in less than fifteen minutes.

Sfx: Sound of bus (engine running)

Narcisa: I was cooking. And we just locked up our apartment. Everything was there, with plates on the table... We just locked it up and left.

We had just one bag. That bag had been right next to the door for days, with candles and toilet paper and things like that for the basement. That was everything we had. A few candles...

Sfx: Sound of bus (driving away)

VO: They first go to Slovenia, but decide to travel further, to a country where they hope to find work. A country they had once visited on holiday, one they have good memories of.

Narcisa: We decided to go to the Netherlands, but how?!

Music

VO: Adi has an idea. He goes into a 'Rent-a-car'.

Narcisa: Can you imagine? Refugees in a 'Rent-a-car'!

VO: The owner is someone they are acquainted with from previous trips to Slovenia. Adi explains that they have an urgent need for a car. Just one minor problem: they have no money. Oh yeah, and there's one other thing...

Adi: When I get to the Netherlands, I don't know... how can I ever return the car? He said: "never mind, just go".

Narcisa: "Try. Find your luck". And that's how it happened.

Music

VO: It's July when the Omerovic family arrives at customs on the border crossing between Germany and Austria. Ena, a girl with dark curly hair, is asleep in the back seat. Adi, a large man with bushy eyebrows, sits behind the wheel. And next to him is Narcisa, a full head shorter than her husband. They are doing everything they can, not to look like refugees.

Narcisa: I decided to put beach towels and things all over, you know, make a mess, like tourists. With sunglasses. And then pffff... you know, act like this. You know, like: Oh, it's so hot. Are you alright?

VO: Then the border crossing comes into view.

Narcisa: I can still remember that big fat border guard. And he just looked at the following car, at us. And just waved his hand: move along! Didn't check a passport, nothing.

Adi: Yeah, they didn't check anything!

Narcisa: After maybe 500 metres, we pulled off to the side of the road. With legs shaking. And... (*sighs*)... My husband couldn't drive any more! The tension... and then... relief.

Adi: You know that you're looking at your future. If you keep going, you have a chance. If you go back, you don't know what you'll do.

Narcisa: We got lucky. Many people got sent back. Very many...

Voice: Chapter two: McDONALD'S

VO: Once arrived in the Netherlands, the family begins the long struggle with immigration officials, who simply cannot understand why the Omerovic family doesn't want help or refugee status. But Adi and Narcisa are adamant. And in the end, immigration makes an exception for them. They can stay. But until they get a permanent residence permit, they are not allowed to work. They are, however, allowed to rent a house, and they find an apartment in Rotterdam-North. They borrow money from the neighbour to pay the rent.

Music

Narcisa: An empty apartment, no mattress, not even a toothbrush. Nothing. I don't think anybody... you don't understand how much you need to just live a simple life, until the moment you've lost everything. Only then do you realize how many things... We had to buy everything again, everything. Yes. Really, I remember that Ena had to play... with boxes and empty shampoo bottles. Those were her toys.

VO: Daughter Ena was five years old when the Omerovic family arrived in the Netherlands. She is now 26.

Ena: I still remember that we walked a lot, we never used public transport. And that was about an hour, walking to school. But because we saw the images from Sarajevo, the war on TV, we never felt like we had it bad. At least I never did, because you knew what people were going through. So you were well off in fact.

VO: Six months after their arrival they have finally saved enough money to buy something really nice for their daughter. An unforgettable moment.

Sfx: Sound of McDonald's

Narcisa: And Adi and I, we're sitting in there watching Ena. How we can now sit in McDonalds with our daughter and buy a hamburger. One, yes... for her. Ena's first McDonald's burger. And we were so happy, laughing... 'We made it!' (*laughs*) Yes, really...

Voice: Chapter three: MEAT

VO: Two years after their arrival in the Netherlands, the moment has come. The Omerovic family receives a residence permit, and can finally start looking for work. Narcisa goes straight to an employment agency.

Narcisa: The woman in there, she said to me: You first have to fill out this form for if something comes up. And I just looked at her. I was so worried: How am I going to buy bread for Ena? And she asked: Why are you looking like that? And I had tears in my eyes.

VO: The woman doesn't say a word, but goes into another room, comes back with a piece of paper and gives it to Narcisa. She has work for her.

Narcisa: I said: "Really?" She said "Yes." "Work?!" She said: "Yes!"

Adi: What was that factory called again? 'Bakker Lekkerkerk'! Packing plant for meat... meat products.

VO: Narcisa is so happy with her job that she bakes a cake for the employment agency. But that's before she knows what the job actually is. She ends up at a conveyor belt in a meat packing plant. She takes her orders from a sixteen-year-old girl.

Sfx: Sound of factory

Narcisa: Then came Monday. I was in the changing room in front of a big mirror. I had to put on a white cap: like this, on my hair, and a white coat. When I put that cap on... I can still see it. I looked at myself in the mirror. A different person than who I was three months ago, in Sarajevo with fashion shows and "ha ha ha, champagne and all."

VO: In Bosnia, Narcisa had her own clothing store. She was even in demand for dressing local artists and movie stars.

Narcisa: And now that white cap and a 16-year-old waiting there, saying: "Put your cap on properly!" With that tone, bossy. And I said: it doesn't matter, it's just a... I remember telling myself: "Just pretend it's a role in a film. From here on, you're an actress and you have to play your part right."

VO: Narcisa shines in her new role as a conveyor belt employee.

Sfx: Sound of factory

Narcisa: That first week... I worked so hard. And that boss, a good man, a good man, Jewish, he came to me and said: "Good work, I'm very happy."

I told him: "With how good I am, just imagine how good my husband is! He's twice as big as me!"

He looked at me: "Does your husband want to work here, too? Is that something for him? What does he do?" I said: "He's an architect, but that doesn't matter! We have different roles now."

VO: Adi has a degree in architecture, but he too, comes to work at the plant.

Adi: They always gave me the hardest work. I had to bring the carts piled high with meat to the freezer. I was that big dumb guy who had to lift and carry everything (*laughs*).

VO: Adi and Narcisa leave the house every morning at five-thirty and come home again at four-thirty. They often work double shifts to make ends meet.

Narcisa: And in those days Ena was home alone in Rotterdam. Went to school alone. From school to home. No telephone. No mobile, no landline either - no phone at all.

Adi: We were scared every day. Whether she got home all right. She was small. She was seven.

Narcisa: A bad neighbourhood. Anything could happen.

Adi: And sometimes the problem was, she couldn't open the door of the apartment building. We were always worried about whether or not she could open it.

Narcisa: And the neighbour said to us: "You can't just leave your daughter alone like that." That door was too heavy for her, she couldn't get outside. And she cried, and he went to work, and he saw Ena crying by the door, trying to get it open... But I said to him: "What can I do? I have no choice."

VO: But before, they *did* have a choice. And they begin to question whether they made the right one.

Adi: All those people who went to the refugee centre, they were better off.

Narcisa: Because other people, like a friend of mine from Sarajevo, they got housing, money every month, a Dutch language course for free. Everything taken care of. And we had to borrow money to pay the rent on the private apartment. Earn it all ourselves.

VO: Ena can't remember much of how hard it was at home. She was in her own world, and had her own mission.

Ena: I was also working really hard to learn Dutch, because I wanted to prove myself and fit in. Show that I wasn't different than other people. So I went to the library a lot. I spent great deal of time there. I think I was nine, when the lady in the library told me:

"OK, so you've read the young person's section, now you can move on to the adults." So I didn't even choose what I read. I just read *everything*. Everything they had.

Sfx: Sound of factory

VO: One day, Narcisa is working on the conveyor belt when she hears news about Bosnia on the radio.

Clip from radio news report:

Again, dozens of people have been killed in heavy fighting in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the last twenty-four hours. Among them, two children, who were part of a... (fade)

Narcisa: I heard about Sarajevo, how many shells in the night, how many dead. And no one's listening. That's the conveyor belt. In one minute, you have to take hundreds of meatballs... not just pack them, but check whether they're good, throw away the one's that aren't. Pack them. Everything so fast... you work and you listen. You understand?

VO: She is unaware that her boss is watching her.

Narcisa: And he walked over to me, and asked: "Are you feeling OK?" I said: "Yes, yes, why?" He said: "You're so red. Do you have a fever? Stop the conveyor belt."

I said: "No, no, I feel fine!" He said: "No, you have to drink some water. You're burning up." And I burst into tears. Yes, it was a difficult time.

VO: Summer is approaching, which means that school students, who work for less, will soon be replacing the temporary employees in the factory. But there's one opening for a permanent job. Adi and Narcisa both apply. Their boss asks them to come to his office.

Narcisa: He said: "I saw that you applied. I don't want you to think that you two aren't good, but... this job is really not the thing for you."

Adi: "This is not for you two."

Narcisa: "You're doing this only to survive. For other people, it's their goal. It's what they want to do with their lives." And we were a little disappointed.

Adi: Disappointed, yes, yes...

Narcisa: But he said: "I'm not going to hire you. I don't want to do that, otherwise I'd be your enemy." And that was... that was a good decision. Otherwise we might still be working in the factory to this day.

Adi: And that's when we started, well, I did, with the ice cream. Ice cream is really something that determined our future.

Voice: Chapter four: ICE CREAM

Sfx: Sound of delivery bike

VO: Adi has gotten himself a new job. With a delivery bicycle with a small freezer attached, he rides to a number of schools to sell ice cream during the recesses. One day, on the way to one of the schools, he has to ride through the infamous "Platform Zero," the area next to Rotterdam Central Station frequented by heroin addicts. (*bicycle bell*) He's in a hurry to arrive on time for the school recess.

Adi: I only went there to get to the school on time. Otherwise... nobody ever goes that way, because it's very dangerous. All those junkies. But I did, and one of the junkies stopped me. I gave him an ice cream, and fast. I wanted to get out of there. Then another came, and a third. I was so scared at that moment. What was going to happen? But then I remembered something I read somewhere, that heroin addicts get this craving for ice cream. And I stopped in the tunnel and turned around. And that was really the best place to sell ice cream in the whole country. Whatever the weather, rain or shine, hot or cold. They wanted ice cream and I was their ice cream man.

VO: He goes to the tunnel five times a day, but the schools are also open, and one of them catches his eye.

Narcisa: One day he told me about it: "oh, you have to see this one school in the city centre, a very extraordinary school. The children all line up in a row, very polite. I've never seen anything like it". And he asked the janitor there: "What kind of school is this? I have a school-age daughter." And he said to my husband: "This isn't the place for you. Not for your daughter. This is a special school for, shall we say, special people." (*laughs*)

VO: Ena goes to a school in their neighbourhood, but Narcisa isn't happy with it. Ena is one of the best in her class, but that's exactly what worries her mother.

Narcisa: My child isn't a genius. How can she be the best? She just got here.

VO: One day, when Adi is at the special school with his delivery bike, the janitor comes to fetch him, because the headmaster wants to talk to him. For his birthday, he would like to

treat all the children at school to an ice cream, and he asks Adi to make the arrangements. For Adi, this is the moment he has been waiting for. He tells the headmaster that he's looking for a school for his daughter. She can come in for a test the next day. She does so well, that she can start right after the summer.

Narcisa: Then the headmaster asked: "What are your plans? How are you going to pay the tuition?"

VO: They bluff, and say they have the money, but in reality they have no idea what they'll do after the summer when the ice cream season is over.

Narcisa: "Money is no problem, we just have to make a couple of arrangements."

Voice: Chapter five: DOUGHNUTS

VO: Narcisa and Adi trade in their delivery bike for an old yellow van, and the ice cream for doughnuts.

Adi: "Doughnuts on wheels"...

Narcisa: ...Adi's idea...

Adi: ...We cut out the sign and and built everything ourselves...

Narcisa: ...We wrote that ourselves: "Doughnuts on wheels"...

Adi: ...Narcisa was like a factory, decorating doughnuts at home with a variety of flavours. Real art!

Narcisa: ...Then you open the door and and all those doughnuts in all the colours...

Adi: ...And then we started getting orders from other businesses. Things went really well then.

VO: Ena is doing well at her new school, and both the children and their parents are intrigued by the new student: a refugee with a father who sells doughnuts on the schoolyard.

Narcisa: And everyone wanted to do something for us, whatever they could.

VO: Waiting at the schoolyard, Narcisa and another mother strike up a conversation. The woman starts to ask her questions.

Narcisa: "What does your husband do, really?" she asked, in this laid back tone. I said: "Oh yes, he's an architect." "Oh, I know a big company, with over a hundred architects. Why not one more?"

I told her: "But he sent out hundreds of application letters but never received a single response."

VO: Adi gets invited to an interview at the architectural firm, but he is sure that nothing will come of it. His biggest problem is that his diploma was left behind in Sarajevo, along with everything else. But the director of the firm tells him:

Adi: "I'll give you a table and three months time – just show me what you can do. No diploma? It doesn't matter to me. If you have a diploma, I'll see it in what you do on the table." And he was right.

Narcisa: That was the ticket to the good life.

Adi: Suddenly, you're somebody. You're somebody, then nobody, then somebody again and then...

Voice: Chapter six: ENVELOPES

VO: Adi gets the job suited to his education, and he can start working as an architect. But their new life comes with new problems...

Narcisa: He heard comments from a few of the younger architects.

VO: Some of his co-workers don't take him seriously as an architect. They call him the "ice cream man."

Narcisa: Hey there, ice cream man!

Adi: They don't want to work with ice cream man. They can't be creative when I'm around.

VO: In the meantime, Narcisa has gone back to the conveyor belt, but this time in an envelope factory.

Narcisa: Envelopes, thousand pieces in one minute. Package them and put the box on the pallet, so a thousand a minute.

VO: She too has co-workers who belittle her. Especially one of the technicians.

Narcisa: He goes like this to me (*snaps fingers*): coffee! That was the worst.

Adi: The envelope factory was something that left a scar in Narcisa's head, I think.

Narcisa: I was insecure, with other people too. I felt like... Like when I would go somewhere on public transport, and there were plenty of seats, I kept standing, because I thought if someone gets on, they have more of a right to sit down than I do. The feeling of being a second-class citizen...

VO: Adi and Narcisa chose to do everything on their own, to preserve their dignity. But the humiliation they face at work makes it increasingly difficult.

Meanwhile, daughter Ena does well in school, but she too begins to feel that she does not entirely belong.

Ena: When I was in secondary school, I was also on the school paper, and after a while they asked me: "So, what are you, actually? Are you Croatian or Serbian?" So I said: "I'm a muslim." They said: "You?! A muslim?" And then they laughed. They said: "But how can that be? You're not wearing a head scarf." Yeah... Painful. As if it is something negative.

VO: Slowly but surely, things finally turn around for the family. When Adi starts winning prizes for his designs, it puts an end to the teasing he endured at the office. The same people, who made fun of him, now end up working for him.

And because he starts earning enough, Narcisa can leave the factory. She starts her own shop. The only thing she needs is customers...

Adi: It was really bad in the beginning. Somewhere in Crooswijk, the poor part of town... no one knows that we've got a shop with products from the former Yugoslavia.

Narcisa: How do people know that you exist? You have to advertise in the paper, or somewhere.

VO: But they have no money for an advertisement. So in the evenings after their work, Adi and Narcisa start looking for potential customers in the phone book.

Sfx: Sound of paging through telephone book

Narcisa: Last names that end with ic...

Adi: ...Everything with ic...

Narcisa: ...Babic, Antonovic, Tjadic...

Adi: We found over a thousand names...

Narcisa: ...Moazinovic. So many!

VO: We sent a brochure to everyone with a Bosnian-sounding last name in Rotterdam. Until...

Narcisa: Suddenly... more and more customers. So busy! And outside... we couldn't fit any more people in the shop!

Adi: Narcisa called me and said: "Don't send out any more brochures! Shop is full!" (*laughs*)

VO: The shop is a huge success. Narcisa and Adi have another child: Nina. They buy a house big enough to give Ena her own floor, and they go on holiday to France and Spain, just like other Dutch families. But when Ena is 14, she wants to go to on holiday... to Bosnia. And that changes everything.

Sfx: Sound of train station

Voice: Chapter seven: BEETLE

VO: It's the year 2000, the Christmas holidays, and Ena has gone to Sarajevo by herself to visit her grandparents. On a cold December evening, Ena is waiting for the tram, when something strange happens.

VO: Ena is now standing at the exact spot she did then in 2000: the tram stop at the Sarajevo main station.

Sfx: Sound of train station

Ena (scene): I was standing here, and it was pretty bad weather, foggy. But there was a certain smell. And I felt incredibly happy, even though I was the only one there at the station. And that smell is really more of a stench, than something nice. Sarajevo is famous for this smell during the winters, for smog, and I remembered it from my childhood. Maybe the smell took me back to the past. And then I called my mother and said: "This is where I want to live. I want to go back. What are we going to do?"

VO: Her parents don't take it seriously.

Adi: I thought: "Forget it. No way". I thought, she'll forget all about it in a few months.

VO: The next summer, the family goes to Sarajevo, to sell their old apartment. Ena spends most of her time with other teenagers in a burned-out VW Beetle, abandoned on the street.

Ena: We sat there talking for hours. And I felt so happy. And then I went to my parents and said: "I don't need money, I don't need clean streets or big stores or those things to be happy." I was happy there in that old beetle, just talking. That's real life. That's what I want.

VO: Ena feels at home, but Narcisa is shocked to see how little her daughter remembers of the city where she was born. On a beautiful summer evening, they stroll through town.

Narcisa: I can still see it, my daughter walking with a girl from the neighbourhood, looking around like someone who just landed on another planet. She didn't know the names of the streets, where to go. Sarajevo was a totally foreign city to her. And I found it hard to take. I thought: "What am I doing to my child? Maybe she'll never belong anywhere, her whole life."

VO: Narcisa says nothing to her husband. But that evening, they are at home together. Ena is out in the Beetle with her friends as usual. Nina is asleep.

Sfx: Sound of dog

Narcisa: We had a little balcony. A little ruined, but still... still ours. And I sat out there smoking a cigarette and I heard the neighbours' dog...

Sfx: Sound of metal dish

...He was always on a chain. And then you hear the sound of the chain against the empty dish. Metal. He was hungry. That was something I remembered from before, that sound. It's hard to explain. Those little sounds, just the sound of the city. And that's when it hit me: I can't go back. Not to the Netherlands, not even for a holiday. I'm staying here. And my husband came out with a glass of wine. Silence between us. We looked at each other and he asked: "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" I said: "I don't know what you're thinking, but I

think so. The same." (*laughs*) And so we decided. With no work, no plan, no calendar, nothing.

Adi: On that balcony, we got the feeling that we miss Sarajevo. That we... suddenly, you feel like you belong here.

Music

VO: They decide to leave everything behind, all that they've accomplished for themselves. And not only because of the smells and the sounds. Now that they're back in Sarajevo, they suddenly feel what they were missing in the Netherlands.

Ena: I didn't feel Dutch. I always said "them". I want to live where I can say "we". I just want to hear my own language around me. Even if someone's cursing at you, at least he's cursing in your language.

Narcisa: It's difficult to explain, but I was never able to say "we Dutch." It sounds a little strange. Not for me, but to other people.

VO: After the holiday, they return to the Netherlands, but only to sell their house and Narcisa's shop in Crooswijk. One day, one of Narcisa's Bosnian customers comes in and says:

Narcisa: "I heard that you're going back. Is that true?"

I said: "Yes, it's true. We're going this summer. Our house is for sale." And she started crying.

I said: "What is it, why are you crying?" I was thinking, we're not friends, she's only a customer.

She said: "I'm crying for myself. All these years, you were my goal. I thought, one day I'll achieve something like her, and then I'll finally be happy. If even *you* can't be happy here, what am I doing here?" (*laughs*)

She was crying over her own fate.

Music

Voice: Chapter eight: FOREIGNERS

VO: Since 1996 peace has returned to Bosnia, but after a years-long siege, the capital Sarajevo is partially in ruins. Many of the buildings that are still standing are pockmarked with bullet holes. This is the city that the Omerovic family returns to in 2001. Bosnians they know, think it's such a strange decision, that they find it suspicious.

Adi: The comments we heard from people were: They've decided to go back because they... how do you say that? (*speaks in Bosnian*)

VO: Daughter Ena translates:

Ena: "They smelled money somewhere!"

Adi: Normally, people don't do that. They don't leave everything they've built behind, to go to a shaky country with no work, and start all over again. That's not something you do. You've got it all, and then you go back. Irrational. Absolutely irrational.

VO: Returning is not easy. Ena has to learn the language, and there is hardly any work; especially for people who fled during the war. They are more or less seen as traitors, because they left the besieged city behind.

Narcisa: "We were here in blood, no power, no water, everything. And you just come back here and say: 'I'm going to work and earn some easy money!'"

VO: Adi tries to get a job as an architect, but here again the citizens who stayed during the war come first.

Adi: Whatever I've built abroad, that doesn't count. They said: "What have you made here?" "Nothing!" (*laughs*)

“You have to show what you’ve done as an architect here. What are you doing HERE?”

VO: It takes years for Adi and Narcisa to find work again. But now they live in a beautiful apartment and run their own architectural firm, where Ena also works. They have a good life.

Narcisa: I just feel different, with mud, with holes in the street, with lifts that don’t work. But still: I’m happy. I feel complete. Here I am “me”.

Music

Voice: Chapter 9: PRICE

VO: Time and again, the Omerovic family has had to build a new life. And every time they have succeeded, but it was never quick or easy. Sometimes, the decision to follow your heart, no matter what, is as impressive as it is destructive.

Narcisa: We really had to pay a high price for going our own way. Years of stress. And I regret after all those years that we... I think... we worked too hard and too much, my husband and I. Some things passed us by. We can’t seem to find peace in ourselves. Like if something nice happens, or if I laugh out loud, I am enjoying myself. Then, somewhere in the back of my head, I’m thinking: “Uh-oh, now something bad’s going to happen.” I don’t dare to laugh any more. I can’t enjoy.

VO: When Narcisa goes to see a psychologist, she draws a diagram on the board and says:

Narcisa: “You are psychologically at the point where normally people are at the age of 75”... and I was about 40 then (*laughs*).

VO: She is now 51, and still struggling with the same problems. She dreams of retiring, but that will remain just a dream. As an independent businesswoman, she has no retirement plan, and in Bosnia there are no social benefits or tuition grants to turn to.

Narcisa: And the children are still young, especially Nina, just 13. How are we going to pay for her tuition? I worry about that. We don’t really have any savings to speak of. And we’re really pretty tired. I feel tired. I’m too tired to work.

Music

VO: The restless life of the Omerovic family might be the result of the war that drove them from their country twenty years ago. But it might also have to do with their characters. You have to possess a certain gambler’s mentality to risk everything for the chance of a better life, and to constantly seek the path of most resistance.

But in spite of all the work, the stress and the many moves, they have no regrets...

Narcisa: You *have* to choose that road, the difficult road. Otherwise you’re empty inside.

VO: ...No regrets about their decision to refuse all assistance from the Dutch government when they arrived as refugees...

Narcisa: In my own way, I felt useful. I was needed, to pack meat. They didn’t have enough people. They needed even *more* people, but they couldn’t find them. I didn’t take anyone’s place.

VO: ...and no regrets about their decision to return to Bosnia.

Ena: Even though it is very hard, right now, if you look at the political situation, the economy, things are really pretty bad in Bosnia, but it’s *my* country. Yes, it is bad, but I belong there.

Adi: I love the Netherlands, really very much. It’s really... I have real feelings for the Netherlands. But it’s not my country.

Narcisa: I often compare it to how an adopted child feels. In my case, Bosnia is my biological mother and the Netherlands is my adoptive mother. Every adopted child is happy with adoptive parents, with life: everything is OK, perfect. It's better than being with biological parents who have problems, or, you know. But still, that child is going to spend her whole life looking for her biological mother, trying to find her. That's how we feel. That longing, that need for your own country.

Music

Titles

Jair: This episode of *Plots* was produced by...

Chris: ...Jennifer Pettersson and Jair Stein

Jair: Research: Ditteke Mensink, Tatjana Mirkovic and Esmá Linnemann

Chris: Senior producer: Katinka Baehr. Production: Sharon de Vries

Jair: Technical: Alfred Koster. With many, many thanks to the Omerovic family: Narcisa, Adi, Ena and Nina, for all the time and hospitality in both Rotterdam and Sarajevo.

Chris: *Plots* is made possible in part by the Mediafund.

Jair: We are very interested in your opinion about what you just heard. Please leave a comment on our website: www.vpro.nl/plots. The site also includes an archive of all our broadcasts, including this one.

Chris: You can also register for our free *Plots* podcast, with a new story every month.

Jair: Tune in at this time next week for more stories in Studio Idzerda. Next: *Bureau Buitenland* with Harm Ede Botje.

Chris: *Plots* will return with new episodes after the summer. Please note the date: 26 August.

Jair: Thank you for listening.