Before she was found buried in the snow with a bullet in her head, eleven-year-old Merita Shabiu believed the American soldiers in Kosovo would protect and save her. Her father discovered she died at the hands of one of those soldiers. Was the betrayal of her hope and trust...

An UNFORGIVABLE *Act?*

by Dean Nelson

"Is this your daughter?" the U.S. soldier asked, his voice trembling.

The soldier appeared to have been crying when he emerged from the building. He showed the photograph he was carrying to Hamdi Shabiu.

Hamdi looked down at a picture of his eleven-year-old daughter Merita, who had been missing for two days. Her thin, blond hair was matted against her head. Her face was bruised and swollen. There was a bullet hole in her forehead. She had been brutally raped and murdered, and dumped in a snowbank outside of town the night before.

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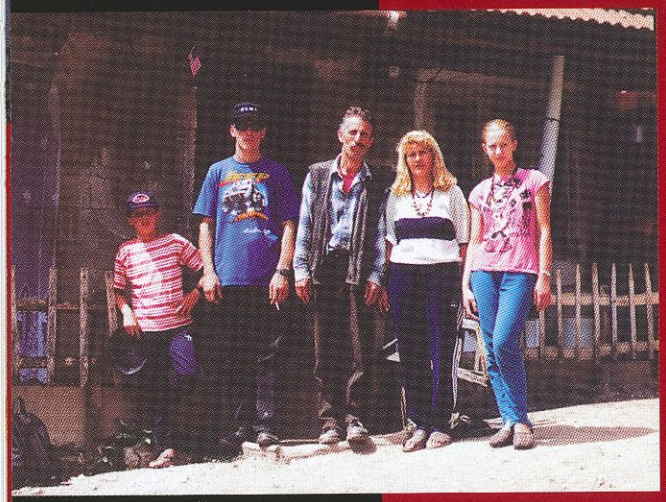
Photos courtesy of Dean Nelson

Hamdi Shabiu, father of Merita, outside his home in the mountain village of Doblde, near the Macedonian border.



The Shabiu family was devastated by Merita's death.

MERITA WAS NEITHER SAVED NOR PROTECTED. INSTEAD, SHE DIED A BRUTAL DEATH AT THE HANDS OF ONE OF THOSE TO WHOM SHE HAD LOOKED WITH HOPE AND OPTIMISM.

"I almost passed out when I saw that photo," Hamdi remembers, his tears flowing freely. A short, wiry man with a wisk-broom mustache, Hamdi's eyes are intense while speaking of Merita. Two years later, and he still needs to look away, mostly skyward, to compose himself.

U.S. troops came to Kosovo in 1999 as part of the NATO force trying to halt the violence between the Serbians and Albanians. Hamdi and his wife, Remzije, moved with their five children from their mountain village of Doblde, near the Macedonian border, to Vitina, during the winter of 2000. Doblde, where Hamdi makes a living cutting firewood and keeping bees, is largely uninhabitable during the harsh winter, and moving down the mountain to Vitina made his Albanian family less vulnerable to Serbian ambushes.

But soon after they arrived in Vitina, Serbian police kidnapped Hamdi and Remzije, beating them and holding them for thirty hours while they tried to find out whether one of the Shabiu sons had joined the Albanian resistance. Blood drained out of Hamdi's ears for days.

IT WAS A SNOWY JANUARY DAY, just two weeks after the Shabius moved into their temporary quarters, when Merita did not come home after school. The parents asked their children if they had seen their sister that day. They had. The parents checked with the school. Merita had been there. No one had seen her since school, though. Hamdi and Remzije notified local authorities.

The next day, sick with worry, Hamdi continued to ask neighbors and officials if they would help look for his daughter. Some children in the nearby playground pointed to an apartment building and told him that there was a body in the basement. Hamdi rushed to the building and was met by a U.S. soldier. "I told him that my daughter had been missing since

yesterday, and I wanted to know if she was in there," he recounts.

She was. Merita's body had been discovered about four miles outside of Vitina the night before and brought to the building for an autopsy. Her attacker, a U.S. Army staff sergeant named Frank Ronghi, had already been arrested. A private who helped Ronghi bury the girl's body had led army investigators to the snowbank where she was hidden.

"She was so white, like an American. She had yellow hair," Hamdi told *The New York Times* soon after Merita's death. He explained that it was impossible to adequately express how he felt, but said, "It was the worst moment of my life. Everyone can stand natural death, but this? All Kosovo prayed for the Americans to come. They came to save us, but the worst thing happened to this family."

When NATO jets screamed overhead on their way to bomb Serbian strongholds, Merita would step out to the edge of her village property and wave. "She knew they were here to protect us," her father says. "She knew they were going to save our people."

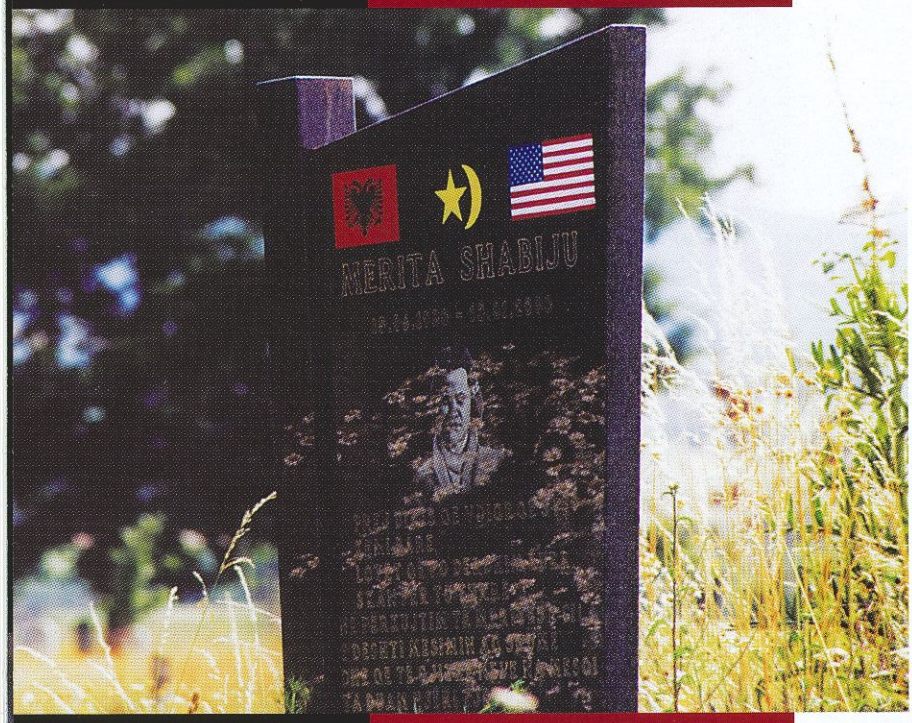
But Merita was neither saved nor protected. Instead, she died a brutal death at the hands of one of those to whom she had looked with hope and optimism. And while it is too late for Merita to forgive her attacker, what about Hamdi? When a daughter is killed, can a father forgive the transgressor? After the "worst thing" happens at the hands of a U.S. soldier, can a family still see Americans as protectors and saviors?

"Forgiveness is being able to see the possibility of something other than a violator's identity being controlled by the events between you," says the Rev. Byron Bland, associate director of the Stanford Center on Conflict and Negotiation and a Presbyterian minister. Bland does not know the Shabius, but he has worked extensively with parents who have lost children in Northern Ireland's civil war.

"Forgiveness is a process," he says. "One indication is when you can use things that happened for good. This comes from Genesis, when Joseph confronted his brothers in the pit. In my personal experience, there are several people in Northern Ireland who now use wanting to honor the love of their sons rather than the hate of the killer, and they have done peace work, or refused to put on the grave that they were murdered by the other side."

AFTER A DAUGHTER IS KILLED, CAN A FATHER FORGIVE THE TRANSGRESSOR?

Military police escort U.S. Staff Sergeant Frank Ronghi (with a blanket over his head) out of an army courtroom in Wuerzburg, Germany, after Ronghi was sentenced to life in prison without parole.



Merita's headstone, which displays both an Albanian flag and an American flag, sits in a community cemetery among the graves of soldiers.

In the Shabiu's two-room house, Merita's backpack still hangs on the wall, next to patches and medals from Dr. Gary Morsch, founder of Heart to Heart International, a humanitarian relief agency.

IT'S IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT IT'S NOT SOCIETIES THAT FORGIVE; PEOPLE FORGIVE.

DR. GARY MORSCH wanted to see Merita's grave. Morsch was sent to Kosovo when his Army Reserve status was activated. There, he heard about the Shabiu family, its tragedy, and its suffering. And so, just days after landing, he set off for a humanitarian visit, traveling as part of a five-vehicle military convoy on narrow mountain roads and rain-rutted cattle paths to get to Doblde. Now, sitting in the Shabiu's two-room, unheated house up in the mountains, with Hamdi and Remzije offering pastries and home-rolled cigarettes, he wanted to know about Merita. Her winter coat still hung on a peg in the doorway, her backpack on the wall. Morsch asked to see where she was buried so he could pay his respects.

"It was a little cleared out area near the village edge," remembers Morsch, a medical doctor and founder of Heart to Heart International, a humanitarian relief agency. "There was no marking in her grave distinguishing hers from about five others in the same plot. The earth was settling on it. Animals had been digging in it." Stunned by what he saw, Morsch told Merita's parents that he "didn't know when we would bring a headstone back, but that we would, and that we would give their little girl a proper burial."

Word about the visit spread quickly. Within hours, soldiers sought out Morsch and gave him fistfuls of dollars collected by their units. Within days, they raised more than $4,000, enough to buy a headstone, engrave it, and provide the Shabius with two cows.

Where once resided an unmarked grave, Merita's headstone now stands tall, a lone sunflower in a field of green. She is buried in a community cemetery, near a group of Albanian soldiers—mother's sons—killed during the war. On her headstone is a picture of a happy, healthy Merita. There is an Albanian flag and an American flag. A statement running along the bottom sums up the sentiment. It reads, "She taught us to love one another."

"They said they knew the man who killed their daughter was not acting on orders from the U.S. military. Somehow they could still see that Americans were helping their people," says Morsch.

Bland understands that, "Forgiveness has to come from the person who confronts the challenge." He knows, too, that it doesn't do much good for him to tell someone they ought to forgive; it can be equally as important to tell them they ought not to forgive." All I have the right to do, I feel, is to stand with people who confront the choice or challenge," he says.

Together with Dr. Fred Luskin, a health psychologist and director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, Bland formed the Healing Our Past Experiences (HOPE) Project. Small groups of Catholics and Protestants from Northern Ireland—all of

whom have had an immediate family member murdered—spend one week at Stanford University learning how to forgive. After training, participants show measurably less anger, depression, stress, and hurt feelings. They also have improved appetites and sleep patterns.

"Forgiveness is learning to find peace, and peace is a mind-body-spirit experience," Luskin explains. "Forgiveness is really secondarily about the person who has hurt you. And forgiveness, a lot of times, has to do with today and tomorrow. It's not about the past."

MORE THAN A YEAR after his time with the Reserves ended, Morsch returned to the Shabiu's mountain home. Hamdi and Remzije treated him as if he were a son. "Merita is alive whenever you are around," the father told him. "There is no greater man in my house than you." It was a joyful reunion tinged with sadness. Patches and medals that Morsch had given the family when he was discharged hung on the wall next to Merita's backpack.

In an emotional exchange that lasted most of the day, Morsch delicately approached the idea of how the Shabius felt about their daughter's murderer. Months after his arrest, Ronghi, who pleaded guilty to killing Merita, told a U.S. military court that he knew what he had done was wrong. "I apologize from the bottom of my heart to the family," he said in a public statement. "I ask them for my forgiveness." The sergeant also apologized to the Army, his unit and his own family "for all the hurt" he caused, and he was sentenced to life without the possiblilty of parole, time he is serving in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

"Although I am uneducated, I understand that this soldier was not ordered to do this," Merita's father said, staring at her backpack, then at the ceiling, as he spoke. "I will not blame anyone else." Then, haltingly, Morsch, asked the Shabius if they were prepared to forgive the soldier. The interpreters, young Albanian men, hesitated before asking Hamdi the question. They looked at Morsch and at each other. "I might be out of line with the question, but I feel compelled to ask it," Morsch said to the interpreters. In turn, the interpreters asked Hamdi about forgiveness.

"I can forgive the Army, but I cannot forgive the soldier," Hamdi said. "When I am ready to give the word of forgiveness, I want you to give the message. I can't say it yet, but there will be a time."

The room at the Shabiu home became quiet. All eyes seemed to turn toward Merita's backpack. Finally, the father spoke again. "This soldier is going to die in prison, isn't he?" Hamdi asked. Morsch nodded. "That means two mothers are crying," he said, looking at his weeping wife. "It would be better if it was one instead of two." &

Preparing to PARDON

IN LARGE PART, THE ABILITY TO FORGIVE IS BOUND UP IN OUR BELIEFS ABOUT OTHERS AND OURSELVES. TO MEASURE HOW WELL-DISPOSED A PERSON IS TO LET GO OF TRANSGRESSIONS, PSYCHOLOGIST KEN HART, DIRECTOR OF THE FORGIVENESS AND ANGER COUNSELING PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WINDSOR IN CANADA, DEVISED A SURVEY. FIFTEEN ITEMS FROM HIS SPIRITUAL READINESS FOR FORGIVENESS QUESTIONNAIRE APPEAR BELOW. FOR THE FIRST TEN QUESTIONS, A "YES" ANSWER EARNS ONE POINT, WHILE A "NO" EARNS NONE. FOR THE LAST FIVE QUESTIONS (MARKED WITH AN ASTERISK) SCORING IS REVERSED, SO THAT A "NO" ANSWER EARNS ONE POINT, AND A "YES," NONE. THE HIGHER THE POINT TOTAL, THE MORE LIKELY YOU ARE TO FORGIVE.

1. When I'm upset with others, I realize that "the problem" is within me.
2. What I think to be the problem is often not the real problem.
3. I no longer want to feel angry and carry grudges.
4. If life is a school, the people who upset me are my greatest teachers.
5. I am willing to let go of my low opinion of myself.
6. The grudges I hold against myself are rooted in ignorance of who and what I really am.
7. The grudges I hold against others are rooted in ignorance of who and what they really are.
8. I keep on reminding myself that I should be grateful.
9. I'm not a human being seeking a spiritual experience; I'm a spiritual being undergoing a human experience.
10. I am trying to let go of the tendency to judge myself and others.
11. I feel guilty over bad things I've said and done in the past.*
12. I secretly feel like I'm inadequate as a person.*
13. When someone harms me, I feel it's OK to harm them back.*
14. I could not bear to face my imperfections.*
15. Once I have a grudge, I rarely let go of it.*

Adapted from a questionnaire by Ken Hart, Forgiveness and Anger Counseling program, www.forgivenessnotanger.org.