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Years of wrenching separation have finally ended for a Serbian family that now calls Port Washington home

There is no question what Sinisa and Branka Angelovski, their son Lazar and Sinisa's parents Vojislav and Nada are thankful for this year.

On the deck of their son's Port Washington condominium were (from left) Vojislav and Nada Angelovski, their grandson Lazar, daughter-in-law Branka and son Sinisa.
Photo by Sam Arendt

They are all together after a long separation.

"It's been nine years since we were all together," Sinisa said, noting only one of his parents at a time was allowed a visa until he became a U.S. citizen last summer.

Nada arrived from Belgrade, Serbia, on Sept. 3, after waiting four years for a visa to join her husband, son and his family in Port Washington.

When she saw 2-year-old Lazar, her only grandchild, at the airport, she burst into tears.

“You can’t explain that. No words,” Nada said in Serbian when asked her reaction to holding her grandson for the first time.

The entire family will spend Thanksgiving in Racine with Branka’s parents, who left Serbia in 2000. Her father, who is Serbian, grew up in Croatia, but had to leave in 1995 after Croatia declared independence from the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Her parents were granted visas to come to the U.S. in 2000 when

Branka was 15.

“I didn’t speak English, but I learned,” Branka said. “I studied Russian in school (in Serbia and Croatia).”

She met her husband at a Serbian function in Milwaukee.

“We talked and I sent her flowers,” Sinisa said.

They were married in 2004 in a traditional Serbian Orthodox ceremony. His parents were unable to attend.

Nada visited Sinisa and Branka in 2005 on a one-month visa, then returned to Serbia. Her husband, who is semi-retired, was given a three-year visa to visit in 2007. He applied for a green card, which extended his visa.

Vojislav missed his wife so much he considered returning to Serbia.

“But that would have started the process all over,” he said.

“It was hardest on Nada because she was alone,” Branka said. “When Lazar was born, we sent her pictures and she could see everyone celebrating and couldn’t be there.”

Having Skype helped tremendously, Branka said. Lazar, who is adept at using his mother’s iPad, recognized his grandmother at the airport.

Sinisa applied for his mother’s visa in October 2010. She was granted an interview at the U.S. Embassy on Aug. 14. Three weeks later, she was with her family.

“Shocked” is how she felt.

One recent night, Nada woke from a dream that she was still in Serbia, saw her husband beside

her and asked, “What are you doing here?”

When Vojislav went with his son to St. Louis for a soccer tournament in October, he worried his wife would not be there when he returned home.

“She’s really here,” he said when he saw her again.

The family has been separated since Sinisa, the Angelovskis’ only child and a professional soccer player in Serbia and Bulgaria, left Europe in 2001 to play for the Milwaukee Rampage soccer team. Unfortunately, the franchise folded after a few years.

Angelovski is director of youth development for North Shore United, a soccer club based in Cedarburg. He also coaches three of the club’s select boys’ and girls’ soccer teams. He formerly coached for Mequon Soccer Club.

Not surprising, Lazar has been kicking a soccer ball since he started walking at 8 months, his proud father said.

The family speaks Serbian at home because they want Lazar to be fluent in both languages.

“Serbian is a difficult language to learn. He’s like a sponge now. He knows the words for most things in English and Serbian,” Branka said.

“I taught him the alphabet in English. He loves Barney (a children’s cartoon character), and we go to story time at the library. I hope by 5 he’s fluent in both languages.”

The family enjoys living in Port Washington and can walk from their condominium to downtown.

“It’s so quiet and peaceful here. I feel so free. I can put him in a stroller and go down the bike path. I feel safe here,” Branka said. “And all the festivals. We go to all of them. You have to love it.”

Nada, who lived in Belgrade, where it was always noisy with honking horns and sirens, also enjoys the quiet town. But it’s frustrating not knowing the language and having to depend on others to interpret for her.

Branka considers the United States her home and has no desire to return to Serbia. Sinisa has fonder memories of his country.

The family has traveled throughout the country, following Sinisa to soccer games and related events. Now, his mother can join them.

Three generations living together is normal in Serbia, with grandparents helping to raise their grandchildren, Branka said.

“When Nada came, Sinisa and I were able to get away for a weekend,” she said. “I’m happy. It

was me against the three of them. She's on my side."

When it comes to disciplining Lazar, Branka said, her mother-in-law is stricter than her father-in-law.

"They're like little buddies," Branka said of Lazar and his grandfather. "He's like a 2-1/2 year old when he plays with Lazar. Grandpa will let him do anything — not Grandma. He knows how far he can go with each."

Getting along is not a problem, she said.

"It's as my father-in-law always says, 'If you love each other and respect each other, it works.'"