

LIVES AT A CROSSROAD Book tells stories of coming to America

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Body

They call the borough of Queens a modern-day Ellis Island.

The 117-square-mile land mass is filled with 2.2 million people of more than 117 nationalities, who speak more than 138 languages. Within its bounds are 68 neighborhoods, two major airports - and it is the subject of a new **book**, "Crossing the BLVD: Strangers, Neighbors, Aliens in a New **America**" (Norton, \$35).

Husband-and-wife writing team Warren Lehrer and Judith Sloan named the **book** after the borough's major thoroughfare, Queens Blvd.

The street also is considered one of the most dangerous in New York City because of the number of pedestrians killed each year trying to cross its 12, heavily trafficked lanes.

Queens Blvd. "was a metaphor for the many things people have crossed in their lifetime - particularly immigrants - like wars, environmental catastrophes, borders, oceans, cultural and language divides," said Lehrer.

The couple spent four years researching, interviewing and photographing more than 100 immigrants and refugees from Asia, Africa, South **America** and Eastern Europe. The 400-page **book** (with a CD including interview excerpts) is filled with first-person accounts of the journeys the people underwent to get to **America**, and what their **lives** are like in their new homeland, Queens.

We meet Amy Li, a 36-year-old mother who escaped from her native China three years ago, looking for religious freedom. She was jailed, beaten, tortured, brainwashed, taken from her family and forced to divorce her husband because she was a practitioner of Falun Gong (a practice of exercises and meditation forbidden by the Chinese government). Li sent copies of the **book** with her **story** to the U.S. Consulate in China and was finally reunited with her daughter, Doudou, now 8, yesterday.

"I am so excited to see her," said Li, who last saw her only child when she was 5. "Being in the **book** helped me so much."

Bovic Antosi's **story** is another harrowing tale. Antosi, 39, an environmental engineer and married father of one, escaped the Democratic Republic of Congo in the cargo hold of a Russian airplane heading to Kennedy Airport. Once here, he was detained for two years in an INS detention center in Springfield Gardens because he had two different sets of identification papers. With the help of an attorney, he was finally released in 1999.

"I miss my country, but if I did stay, I don't think I would be here today **telling** you my **story**. I think I would have been in jail or murdered," said Antosi, now seeking an engineering job.

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Sloan, an academic and performance artist, and Lehrer, an award-winning typographer, author and teacher, hope their **book** puts a human face on many of today's issues and conflicts.

"I hope people talk more to other people they don't know," said Sloan. "There is hope in having these kinds of dialogues with people rather than just making assumptions about other cultures.

"I learned a lot about many different countries, and about the people I am **living** with on a daily basis who are on the subway. I recognize that no matter who you are, you are a minority on the 7 train."

Both authors said spending time with the people in the **book** was one of the best parts of the project. And Sloan says one of her fantasies is to have a "Crossing the BLVD" event on the No. 7 train.

Graphic

TARA ENGBERG STREET OF DREAMS Warren Lehrer and Judith Sloan with "Crossing the BLVD" on Queens Blvd. and 44th St. Couple's account of immigrants' journeys to Queens uses borough's main road as "metaphor for many things people have crossed in their lifetime."

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