THE LATEST MIX IN THE CITY'S MELTING POT / ALBANIANS, USED TO COMMUNISM, ARE CHANGING FISHTOWN, EVEN AS THEY STRUGGLE TO FIND THEIR WAY.

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Body

The old sidewalks of ***Fishtown*** are coming alive with the neighborhood's newest residents, Albanian immigrants who step out regularly for a leisurely, after-dinner shetitje.

In Albania, the shetitje, or walk, is a social tradition in a country where many enjoy strolling and friends drop by to warm welcomes. Here, it means ***even*** more.

It is one sign of a quiet transformation taking place in this historically working-class neighborhood of narrow rowhouses, front porches, and Irish, Polish and German stock.

Albanian immigrants, fleeing violence and economic collapse in their native land, are pouring into ***Fishtown***. As they rent or save to buy houses, all along York Street, here and there on Tulip, Dauphin, Memphis or any number of ***Fishtown***-area addresses, they are remaking entire blocks.

Albanian arrivals are ***changing*** the face of social-service agencies, bolstering school honor rolls, and swelling attendance at churches.

"They've kept coming and coming," said the Rev. Dennis Rhodes, director of St. John Chrysostom's Albanian Orthodox Church, a Center City institution where the congregation has doubled and the Sunday school has grown from only a dozen immigrant children to nearly 60 in the last three years.

Newcomers, such as Vlashi and Natali Plaku and their two young children, have followed in the footsteps of a generation that settled in such affordable ethnic enclaves as ***Fishtown*** or West Philadelphia in the early 1900s. That original group, nearly 400 families, worked in a variety of trades or opened shops and restaurants.

But the flow stopped during World War II because of Italy's invasion of Albania and ***later*** Albania's communist rule, considered the most oppressive of the Eastern bloc, all of which left the original U.S. immigrants cut off from their roots.

Now, a new generation is rediscovering those connections, making its ***way*** to neighborhoods populated by friends or family.

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About 300 ***Albanians*** live in ***Fishtown***. Most have arrived since 1996 from such coastal towns as Fieri and Vlore in a country perhaps best known recently for its role in Wag the Dog, a movie about a U.S. president embroiled in a sex scandal. Albania also recently made headlines as political instability - armed opposition forces set government buildings ablaze this month - rocked the tiny, mountainous country long mired in poverty.

(About 30 families with ties to Gjirokaster, in southern Albania, also have settled here, in Upper Darby.)

But ***even*** as they transplant some traditions, the ***Albanians***, more than some other immigrant groups, face intense cultural adjustments.

"They have a huge ***struggle***," said Jacqueline Hall, executive director of the Lutheran Settlement House, which serves ***Fishtown*** and Kensington.

Albania's communists and notorious secret police engendered a deep suspicion of institutions and ***even*** of the motives of neighbors, experiences that Albanian immigrants bring with them, making them reluctant to trust others and build networks.

"The big problem [is] we don't have a good organization to help these people, to take them here, there and give them jobs," said Hasan Risilia, 73, a retired foreman who emigrated from Vlore in 1945 and lived as a refugee in Italy before settling in ***Fishtown***.

Under dictator Enver Hoxha, who ruled for four decades until his death in 1985, public worship was squelched and parents were not permitted to give their newborns religious names.

"The terror was so deep," said Andrew J. Rubis, a third-generation Albanian American and a Settlement House caseworker hired last year to serve this growing community. "I know this one woman who taught her children this particular ceremony with water. She told them what to do, [but] she never told them why, that it was a link to the baptism of Christ."

Though the original Albanian immigrants, primarily Orthodox or Muslim, practiced their religions, the newcomers often attend religious services more for social than holy sustenance. ***Even*** Albanian Muslims go to St. John's each Sunday because of the after-service coffee hour. Others visit the Albanian American Moslem Society on Girard Avenue.

By the early 1990s, ***communism*** had unraveled. But the country was still suffering, from pyramid schemes, economic turmoil and general lawlessness, prompting in this decade an exodus of more than 700,000 ***Albanians***, nearly a quarter of the country's population.

For the thousands who have come here, American ***ways*** - ***finding*** a job based on merit, not connections, securing health care, competing for a good education - have been "a big, big culture shock," said Mike O'Brien, chief of staff for State Rep. Marie Lederer (D., Phila.), whose 175th district includes ***Fishtown***.

"They tend to come to us for things taken for granted in Albania," O'Brien said, noting that a steady stream asks for health coverage.

Perhaps inevitably, some Albanian immigrants have clashed with their American neighbors.

"I think they need to learn to participate in the American ***way*** of life," said Marion Gaudinski, a York Street resident and landlord who has Albanian neighbors and tenants.

A nurse by training, she has helped many ***Albanians*** with health-care issues. But she also has criticized them for preferring soccer to baseball or Albanian to English.

"When my grandparents came, it was a disgrace to show your ethnicity," said Gaudinski, a third-generation Lithuanian American.

To ease the transition, the Lutheran Settlement House has scrambled to hire Albanian speakers, such as Rubis and a receptionist, add English classes, and offer workshops.

Not all efforts, though, succeed among a people ***used*** to ***communism***. For example, the agency recently held a program on entrepreneurship, and "no one came from the Albanian community," Hall said. "They're not from a capitalistic society."

That may help explain the noticeable lack of Albanian businesses or restaurants in this ethnic stronghold.

The Plakus, who emigrated from Fieri in 1995, have faced their share of hurdles. In Albania, Vlashi was an anesthesiologist and Natali a schoolteacher, an especially prestigious occupation there.

"We didn't know much about America," said Natali Plaku, 45, wearing a flowing print skirt, her dark hair pulled neatly back.

Like so many others in Albania, the family applied for American visas through a lottery system designed to encourage diversity among U.S. immigrants. About 50,000 permanent-resident visas are made available each year to natives of countries as varied as Australia, Ethiopia and Singapore.

The State Department estimates that since the first lottery in 1993, 14,800 ***Albanians*** have received these much-prized U.S. green cards. Many have settled along the East Coast, mostly in Boston and Worcester, Mass.

When the Plakus won, they immediately uprooted their comfortable lifestyle for the promise of America.

"All over the world, all the people dream to come to America," said Natali Plaku, who taught English back home. "We think life will be easier here.

"But it's not so easy," she said. "It's very hard, especially for our age."

Despite their education, the Plakus, who stayed at first with friends, could not ***find*** work before ending up at a local factory, sorting cassette tapes.

"We worked from morning until night," Natali Plaku said. "Our kids were alone."

She offers a smile of resignation. Although her plight has improved - she is a substitute teacher now in the Philadelphia School District, grappling with discipline problems unheard of in Albania - her husband, less skilled at English and typical of many Albanian professionals, still works the assembly line, unable to pass the exams necessary to practice his medicine.

Even Albanian welders must overcome a technology gap. Others come from more rural areas with few transferable skills, forcing them to accept menial jobs.

Step by step, though, the Plakus have gained ground. Natali Plaku sits in the nicely furnished living room of her corner rowhouse on Dauphin Street, a house they bought a year ago. After work, her husband, also 45, attends classes at the Community College of Philadelphia and studies his medical textbooks.

But like so many immigrants everywhere, this family's hopes and dreams rest with its children. Erkanda, 13, and Ervis, 10, have readily mastered English and American ***ways***. One ***evening***, Ervis, wearing a Flyers cap and Nike T-shirt, showed off skateboard stunts out front, while his sister, who prefers to be called "Erica" (sounds more American), rolled her eyes.

They straddle two cultures. Their mother insists that the children speak only Albanian at home and says she wants to teach Ervis how to read and write his mother tongue. The family already has made one trip back to Albania and proudly attends Philadelphia's annual Albanian Flag Day in November.

Erkanda, an eighth grader, gets straight A's at Alexander Adaire Public School. Like many Albanian students, she ***finds*** math and science particularly easy - a vestige of the strong schools under the communists.

Ervis also gets good grades and, like his sister, wants to study medicine, perhaps ***even*** start a family clinic with his father.

"Here, in America," Natali Plaku says of her children while waiting for her husband to return from the grind of the factory, "they can go anywhere and be someone, if they will work. I think they will become someone."

Graphic

PHOTO AND MAP;

PHOTO

Natali Plaku and her children, Erkanda, 13, and Ervis, 10, on East Dauphin Street. ***Fishtown*** is the ***city's*** No. 1 Albanian community. (The Philadelphia Inquirer, CHARLES FOX)

Ervis Plaku's Americanization includes skateboarding with friends in front of his ***Fishtown*** house. He'd like someday to start a clinic with his anesthesiologist father.

An eighth grader ***used*** to a more rigorous system back in Albania, Erkanda Plaku, who likes to be called "Erica," gets straight A's here. (The Philadelphia Inquirer, CHARLES FOX)

A hooded policeman guards the center of Tirana, the capital of Albania. Fleeing violence and economic collapse, Abanians flock to Philadelphia. (Reuters, OLEG POPOV)

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