



I was shocked!" says Marija Koljevic (not her real name). We are having pasta at an Italian restaurant in south-west London, and she's reading through the menu jokily with an Italian-English accent. She is a settled professional, having had an Italian boyfriend the last two years.

She has just celebrated the Serbian Orthodox Christmas – two weeks after the Anglican Church – while most Londoners were busy fighting for the best bargains in the crowded January sale.

Four years ago, she lived a normal life with 120,000 inhabitants in Cacak, south of Belgrade. That is as normal as life can be after 10 years of war.

It is also almost four years since the bombs fell. "You just ran to the nearest basement," she recalls. "We sat there, hundreds of us, and we were angry. Women and children sat inside, waiting and playing cards, while the men rushed out to fight the NATO-planes."

But life totally changed for Marija on that morning her cousin called from London. "We spoke about normal things when he suddenly invited me to London and live there at his expense. I was shocked!" says Marija.

"In Yugoslavia, you just don't have the opportunities to go abroad unless you're a daughter of a king, or something. Even if you've got a good job or money, you are simply not allowed to leave."

It still was a hard decision to make as Marija had never been outside Yugoslavia.

And after years of striving, she had finally almost secured the lifestyle she wanted: education and a permanent job with a reasonable salary. She says it was hard to get even there at home.

"Anyway, to learn English has always been what I really wanted. When I was younger I wanted to study English at university. But I had to be there for eight years and my mum couldn't afford that. Instead, she forced me to do economics."

When asked how her friends and family reacted to the move, Marija says: "All my friends said just go, go, go! Even my director at work. He said he would be glad to see my dreams come true, and promised to keep my position open in case I changed my mind about leaving."

Marija doesn't mention how her mother felt. She still lives in Yugoslavia with her youngest daughter.

Marija is so excited: "Everything was

By Randi Nørstebø Vartdal

there for me. I simply could not say no."

So, in the spring of 1999, Marija applied for a visa to come and stay with her cousin but she didn't get it.

"I was desperate. Not many young people in Yugoslavia get the opportunity I got. Everything was fine, the finances, a home, and a job. And then I was let down just because of a visa."

But it still was Marija's dream to learn English. In fact, it became more and more important. Not only for Marija, but also Yugoslavia. In May 2000, the visa papers were ok, and she finally left for London.

"I was happy as a Larry," Marija says and asks if I understand the expression. I do, but find it difficult to see how she could feel that way.

She tells me she studied English in the mornings and worked as a £3.60 an hour

"It makes me wanna scream seeing all the chances you've got that I haven't"

dishwasher in the afternoons and even sent money back to her widowed mother.

Marija stood weeping in an overheated kitchen without windows or air-conditioning. In the nights she tried to get some sleep, sharing the bedroom with four nieces. Still, she and Larry were equally happy simply because it was always her dream to learn English. And it was better than staying angry in Yugoslavia.

"I was so disappointed about all the restrictions in Yugoslavia."

Marija seems sad to talk about the war. When I ask her what the conflict was all about, she says that people like me remember the war far better than her.

"For me it feels like centuries ago," she says. "But we didn't want NATO to solve our problems. We wanted to solve them ourselves. But then NATO came by force."

She had thought everything was ok until the bombs fell. "I still didn't believe it was war until I heard the alarm. I didn't believe it was true until the last minute."

When asked what she thought about the war now, Marija says: "I feel indescribably angry that somebody can do a thing like that. I'm shocked that civilised human beings can do such a thing. We were all innocent."

Marija lost many friends who were living in a nearby village as a result of what NATO called a "mistake bombing".

It's been four years since hundreds of Serbians protested outside No 10 Downing Street. They were angry at the media coverage of the conflicts in Yugoslavia, which they felt focused only on the Albanians' sufferings and not on the Serbian victims.

Marija also explains that she feels prejudged by being a Serb. "There are always sarcastic comments when I introduce myself. People think I come from a violent country. I am not saying we are totally peaceful. Ten years of war proves that. All I am saying is that there are always two sides to it... people seem to believe that no Serbs got killed in the war. That they just killed."

Marija orders another coffee, her face a mask of sadness. She is sad talking about the war and would rather tell how excited she is about her new job and a place at the college. She is also happy that, at 25, she can already speak fluent English.

She adds: "I'm glad I befriended people from former Yugoslavia in London. I feel sorry for things that happened in the war, and it's amazing we

can be friends here." Being in Yugoslavia you feel like you can't do many things. You can study and work, but you will have no money to maintain yourself. And if you have money, you still cannot leave because nobody will give you a visa."

When asked how Marija feels about seeing other youths travelling around the world she says:

"It makes me want to scream. I get angry seeing all the opportunities you've got that I haven't."

She sighs, saying: "Try to imagine how angry you can get if your boyfriend's family invited you to Italy for a couple of days... you plan the trip, buy the ticket, you're excited about finally seeing the place where your boyfriend was born but suddenly, the visa office simply tells you are not allowed to go. But even if life in London is full of restrictions, it is better than in Yugoslavia."

"I am glad I left. I would be 50 before things change in Yugoslavia."