Making a forever home in Roscommon

SPECIAL REPORT

by Darragh Kelly

Erik, Ladislav, Eva, and Eva-Maria Dzurikova from Slovakia.

Since the turn of the century, the level of migration to Ireland has substantially increased. Reflective of those changes is the population of Roscommon, which has seen a considerable influx of migrant communities to the county.

As many of these communities make the county their home, each has their stories. Many have suffered considerable loss and hardship coming here, leaving many loved ones behind.

Not only that, but the challenges assimilating into a new culture with a different language and different cultures has been difficult. Accessing services has been another challenge. Yet for all the lurid and spurious stories about migrant communities coming to Roscommon to exploit 'the system', there are those who now call the county their home and, in turn, enrich local communities.

Agencies such as the Roscommon Women's Network, Roscommon LEADER Partnership, and others have made valiant efforts to support migrant families who now reside here. But it's the resilience and fortitude of family members that's to be commended. Many of those have fled persecution, violence, and poverty to make new lives for themselves against such overwhelming odds.

SLOVAK, SO GOOD

One such family who has made the county home is Ladislav and Eva Dzurikova from Kostyce, near Bratislava in western Slovakia. The couple have been 13 years in Ireland and now reside in Cloonfree, near Lanesboro, with their five children, Simona, Eva, Ladislav, Peter, and Josef.

Eva is a stay-at-home mother while Ladislav Sr is a part-time musician who is actively looking to perform in local bars and clubs. Already he and members of his family … County Council under the title The Slovakian Jazz Band, where that musical genre is extremely popular.

> It was very difficult at the start, particularly with the language. But living in Roscommon our family has a better chance to get an education

"We came here to make a better life for ourselves, particularly for our children, three of whom suffer from loss of hearing. Accessing healthcare and things like hearing aids for our children was extremely difficult to get back in Slovakia," explained Eva.

"We also came here to improve our English. Roscommon is very different to home. It is a very happy, friendly place. People like Maria (Harris, who is employed by the Roscommon Women's Network) have … kia. We looked for asylum initially," added Eva of her home, which became part of the EU in 2004 after separating from the Czech Republic to become an independent state in 1993, described then as 'the velvet divorce' due to its peaceful transition.

Despite the separation and EU ascension, making ends meet was difficult for the Dzurikova family, who are Catholic in faith. Ladislav, a plumber by profession, found it difficult to get work at home and found the transition to Roscommon life challenging.

But from talking to the family, it's easy to understand that whatever about their own trials and tribulations, it's their children that they hope will ultimately reap the benefit from moving to Roscommon. The couple's grandson Eric is a fifth-year student at Roscommon Community College and plays hurling for good measure.

"It was very difficult at the start, particularly with the language. … cation. All the family is now living here. We sometimes return to Slovakia for a visit, the last time was three years ago. But Roscommon is our home now," said Eva.

South African native Lucy Alexia Mneube and her son Paul both reside in Monksland. Lucy has three other sons Sean, Shane and Armani. Sadly her husband Nick died a number of years ago from meningitis, prior to the family coming to Roscommon.

Lucy arrived in Roscommon in 2010 from Johannesburg. Her reasons for leaving were a matter of personal safety. There's a high level of random crime in Johannesburg and it is not a safe place. Essentially I wanted a better life, she said.

"Unfortunately, there's quite an abuse of power in South Africa and a lot of corruption," she said of her country, which gained its independence following democratic elections in 1994. The election resulted in Nelson Mandela becoming president …

"I came to Irel… …d on September 1, 2010, a… arrived in an asylum centre … Dublin where I resided f… one month," explaine… Lucy. Her son Paul is an en… …ging and personable youn… …han — aged 19; he is stu… …ing culinary arts in Athl… …e IT.

"My ambition i… to become an entrepreneur… the moment, I'm doing a… …t of research to see how… …can achieve that. I'm l… …king to find mentors and … …ing some research online a… through audiobooks," said … Paul.

Lucy lives with … family in a three-bedroom … self-detached home in M… …ksland and works with th… Brothers of Charity in Rosc… …mon. Back in South Afri… …, she worked as a PA for … business in the heart of Joha… …nesburg. "I came to Ireland … because it offered easier acce… … to me — it is a visa-less cou… …try."

Lucy tells of her … experiences on RTE telev… …ion, particularly about her … experience of direction pr… …vision. "To live in direct pr… …vision is very difficult … choice of entering direct provision," she said.

"When you're in direct provision, you cannot work or go to school. You were living on a timetable for food, signing in and so on; it was a type of prison."

Despite that experience, Lucy now believes she is on "the right track. I'm currently going to college to the Athlone Training Centre where I'm doing a healthcare course. I've also published a book about my experiences called *For You With Love*, which is dedicated to my eldest Paul — whose dad passed away when he was two."

Both Paul and Lucy describe themselves as Christian and both claim "wherever you come from doesn't determine where you go", a statement founded not so much on practical reality but as much on their hopes and goals for the future.

"My initial experience wasn't easy, but you have to persevere. It's also easier when one is settled with a … there are racist comments wherever you go — it is about your attitude and how you react to them."

For Paul, his mantra is "action or excuse — you decide to do something or not. I don't want anyone robbing that statement," he said, smiling. "For me, it's about doing as well as I can at college — study is a big challenge."

Lucy hopes to launch her self-published book, *For You With Love*, to coincide with International Women's Day on March 8, in conjunction with the support of the Roscommon Women's Network.

Monika Zawislinska with her partner Michal Fierek and their children Sandra and Lily.

SAFE FROM SYRIA

One of the faces of the Syrian community in Roscommon, meanwhile, is 21-year-old Ghassan Shmet. Ghassan was one of the high-profile Syrian residents at the Emergency Response and Orientation Centre (EROC) in Ballaghaderreen which opened its doors to displaced members of the Syria … her daughters Ahlam and Judie secured their own home on the Galway Road in Roscommon Town after a long and protracted process, having resided in the EROC facility for over 20 months.

"We had been waiting for a house but now we're very happy," said Ghassan. "My grand-aunt has needs but we now feel very comfortable with our own living room and sitting room. For myself, I hope to start education soon.

"Back home, my ambition was to become a journalist," he said, adding that now, he hopes to work in computers. Ghassan was also the subject of a BBC documentary on the Syrian community in Ballaghaderreen as well as one of the recipients of a Rehab Person of the Year award on behalf of his community last year.

"On January 1, 2016, I first left Syria and travelled through Turkey and Greece. I eventually arrived in … community in Ballagh… …, life in the EROC … could be challenging.

"Ballaghaderreen is … small town. Very often … had nothing to do. We w… to work and do courses … initially we couldn't — … was difficult. Being on … welfare, receiving €20 a … and living in the centre … be boring. But again, th… people of the town were friendly.

"When I first arrived … found it difficult to comm… …cate, I had very little En… and found it difficult to … to people and have a con… …sation. In 2011, when the … started, I was studying i… school and my dad was w… …ing in Deir ez-Zor, a city … …cated close to the border … Iraq.

"The family moved to … Hasakah, a bigger city la… on. Dad worked with a co… …pany making paper but h… later opened a café in the … like war and I didn't want to do that, so I left.

"My mam, my dad, my brother, and a sister — they are still in Syria — I can't travel to see them and I miss them so much. For three years, I haven't seen them," said Ghassan.

"I do try to keep in touch with them, but the war is ongoing and the internet is not good.

"I don't think I will go back to live in Syria. In Greece, I lived in a camp in a caravan, conditions were really awful. I didn't have refugee papers and I knew nothing about Ireland. But my English has improved.

"I haven't experienced racism here — people have been good to me. My ambition is to return to education and perhaps in time open an internet café, specialising in Arabic coffee. For me, it's important to feel safe, to sleep well — my cousin, working in his shop, was killed by a bomb in Syria.

"Some people are afraid when they hear I and others profess the Islamic faith. But we like to fraternise with other faiths. We understand Christian people and their beliefs. Again, I would like to thank the Government and the people of Roscommon for helping me and others here," said Ghassan.

Ghassan Shmet from Syria.

> When I became 18, I feared I would be conscripted into Assad's army. I don't like war and I didn't want to do that, so I left

POLISH POWER

Monika Zawislinska, Michal Fierek, and their daughters Sandra and Lily have been living in Castlerea for the past 12 years. Initially, Michal came for a holiday to visit friends and didn't leave, while for Monika, from Warsaw, her plan was to stay for two years.

While in Poland, Monika studied Russian and is also a law graduate. She works in administration for Roscommon Women's Network while Michal worked in a bakery, but is now on disability allowance after being diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma three years ago.

"At the beginning (of the diagnosis) it was very hard. When we arrived here, we also found it tough. Though we learn English at home in Poland, it's more American English and the Irish version of the language was hard to pick up at first.

"As Polish people, we found it tough to fit in. Unlike, say, the Brazilian community or other nationalities, there isn't a particularly strong sense of community I feel among Polish people here. But from my experience, I can and do help people who are going through what I went through attempting to learn the language and who are trying to settle down.

"Michal's sister is in Dublin but he doesn't like cities. I suppose he followed his heart," said Monika, laughing.

The couple live in a three-bedroom house and say the… like living in Castlerea and Roscommon.

Daughter Sandra is a first year student in Castlerea Community School while Lily is in her first year in … school. Despite their fondness for Roscommon, Polan… is still very much home for the couple.

"We were planning to go back to Poland but the econ… …mic situation there isn't great. I would like to go hom… But the overall cost of livin… is cheaper here. But I think we'll be staying here. Michal's passion is cooking; h… would like to get work as a chef.

"I enjoy my work with R… …common Women's Network — they help a lot of familie… like my own. They're doing great job.

"Both my mum and siste… are in Poland. My sister, wh… is a graphic designer, has never been to Ireland, but m… Mum has come over to visit. I do try to get back to Poland when I can."

Monika has been involved with the Roscommon Women's Network inter-cul… …tural projects and has met a range of different people, who thought different in nationality share many of her experiences and challenges. "We may look differ… …ent and have different back… …grounds but we all have the same worries and hopes as people."