

War refugees open Töska, bring success to Mt. Airy

by Len Lear

No matter what befalls their new eatery in Mt. Airy, Töska Restaurant & Brewery, it will be like a picnic at Morris Arboretum & Gardens compared to what the owners endured as children. Brothers Leo, Jim and Pep Osmanollaj and other members of their family escaped from the Kosovo region of the former Yugoslavia, where Serbian militias carried out “ethnic cleansing” against ethnic Albanians in 1998 and 1999.

“We saw people shot and killed,” said Leo, who was 10 years old at the time. “The Serb military gave us 12 hours to leave, or they’d kill us.”

So the family hid out in a nearby forest for two weeks while the Serbs burned down their house – a small one which had housed both grandparents, four uncles, three aunts and many children.

“People would bring bread to us in the woods so we wouldn’t starve. We were so lucky to eventually be allowed into the U.S. as war refugees. God bless this country.”

Leo’s older brother, Jim, agreed.

“We would not be alive today if we had not escaped,” he said. “The U.S. gave us life and freedom.”

“The Serbs engaged in ethnic cleansing, just like Hitler did with the Jews, but it was based on ethnicity, not religion,” Leo said. “If it was not for Bill Clinton ordering the bombing of Serbia and ending the war, who knows what would have happened?”

Upon their arrival in the U.S., the brothers said, they got an enormous amount of help – and they will always be grateful. Pastor Sara Hale of St John’s Tinicum Lutheran Church helped the family find housing in Essington, Delaware County. And they want to publicly thank Jean Goerlach, of the Tinicum Township Fire Company, “who did so much for us, as did so many other amazing people who gave us things like food, clothing, and bikes.”

The brothers’ father, Shefqet Osmanollaj, had made his living working in Kosovo bakeries prior to their escape and continued the trade after immigrating to the U.S. The brothers bused tables at several area restaurants and worked at McDonald’s. Then they parked cars and “hosted” at Harrah’s Casino in Chester for six years.

But their American dream was always to own their own restaurant, which they did in 2016 when they opened Haveaburger in Havertown, even though they had no previous restaurant experience except as busboys.

In 2018, the brothers, who learned on the job, opened their first mini-chain, M20 Burgers & Salads, in Queen Village. They later opened M20 outlets in Wyn-

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Brothers Jim (from left), Leo and Pep Osmanollaj, who built a successful restaurant business after fleeing Kosovo as war refugees, opened Töska in mid-June at 7136 Germantown Ave., former home of Earth Bread + Brewery restaurant, which closed last year.



The Osmanollaj brothers had to leave their grandfather, Avdi Osmanollaj (who they affectionately call “Baba”), behind in Kosovo after their house was burned down by Serbian militiamen in 1999. He is now 83 years old and still living in Kosovo.

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Brothers Jim (from left), and Pep Osmanollaj and Leo (not seen here) opened Töska in mid-June at 7136 Germantown Ave., formerly home to Earth Bread + Brewery for 14 years until July 1 of last year.

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newood, Newark, Delaware, Cherry Hill and East Norriton.

In mid-June, the brothers opened Töska (the name of an Albanian dialect) at 7136 Germantown Ave., formerly the home of Earth Bread + Brewery, which closed last summer after 14 years in Mt. Airy.

“Right after we opened, people just kept wandering in. We hated to see Earth Bread + Brewery close, but people in the area have been waiting for something new,” Leo said. “We have had great support from the community, more than we expected.”

In late November, the family will open Baba's Hot Chicken in Audubon, which they are dedicating to their granddad. “Baba” means grandfather in Albanian.

“He is 83, and he has always been there for us,” Leo said.

“Töska is one of the smoothest openings we ever had,” Leo continued, adding that with the wood-fired oven already in place, pizzas were natural for the menu. They hired a great team of people and covered the walls with photos of Albania.

“We want to bring Albania to Mt. Airy,” Leo said.

The brothers, who also operate a restaurant consulting business called Silent Partner, ultimately want to franchise M20 Burgers & Salads, which is fast-casual dining with no alcohol.

Töska, however, is their first restaurant with a liquor license. They serve some excellent Italian wines, freshly brewed beer and craft cocktails. Leo said he has

been texting Mark Cuban, the billionaire entrepreneur from the tv show “Shark Tank,” about a possible partnership in their franchise plans, and he showed me the back-and-forth text messages to and from Cuban to prove it.

Töska's menu offers wood-fired pizzas, salads, vegetarian options, a kids' menu, burgers, cheesesteaks and desserts. In the near future, they will be adding authentic Albanian dishes to the menu, and the brothers recently added brunch on weekends and lunch Sunday through Thursday.

For more information, visit toskabrewery.com. Len Lear can be reached at lenlear@chestnuthilllocal.com