

ORAL HISTORY INDEX AND SUMMARY

Interview with: Adonis Alaj

Date: 10/1/16

Location: Manchester

Total duration: 1 hour 25 minutes 53 seconds

Interview By Pam Dawes. Summary by Kelly Bücher.

The interview plays as one long recording.

1.	Start time	Finish time	Approximate duration	Brief description
	00.00	1hr 25mins 53 secs	1hr 25mins 53 secs	Adonis talks about about his life in Kosovo before the war, how it affected his family, their journey to U.K. via Macedonia, and life in Manchester.

<p>Pen sketch</p>	<p><i>Born and raised in the capital of Kosovo, Prishtina, Adonis remembers a secure early childhood surrounded by his family, including his beloved grandmother, and many friends. At the age of 13 everything changed. He experienced the increase of aggression as people were violently evicted: forcibly turned out of their flats and ordered out of the country by armed Serb police and soldiers. After several moves and three unsuccessful and terrifying attempts to leave Kosovo, his family reached Macedonia and were evacuated to the UK with special needs due to his grandmother's blindness and fragility. Adonis quickly settled at a reception centre, attended a Catholic Secondary School and went on to college and university in Manchester. He is overwhelmed when comparing the treatment his family was subjected to during the war to their new life in Manchester. He lives with his wife in South Manchester, works for an insurance company and his closest friends continue to be 3 boys he met at their Trafford reception centre 1999.</i></p> <p>(00:00)</p>
<p>Summary of interview content</p>	<p>Adonis introduced himself and says that he moved to the U.K. with his family on May 11<sup>th</sup> 1999. They have lived in Timperley for 16 years. He says that he lived in Pristina and that's where his pre- war memories are of happiness and being an everyday kid playing out every day. Adonis says that it wasn't until 1997 or 1998 that things changed although there was always trouble in the background. He was always cautious of Serbs and the police, as a kid. He describes one neighbour, a tall man, as being particularly frightening.</p> <p>He describes being told by his parents that they were suddenly moving a few blocks and his confusion as to why. The reason was because the Serbian neighbour, the tall man, lived above them and he had menacingly told his father that if he did not leave the flat, he could come and visit them.</p> <p>(05:00) He describes Serbs at that time as dangerous as nine times out of ten they would be carrying weapons. He says soon after this they saw armed Serbian troops ordering ethnic Albanian civilians to leave the flats and people fleeing immediately. Adonis says that this is when his family started to panic.</p> <p>He describes the people living at his auntie's with him in a one bedroom flat: his parents, his brother, his sister, his auntie, her husband, their daughter and their son: all living in a one bedroom flat for quite a few days. He says that then the Serbian troops came to the building and ordered them to leave straight away.</p> <p>(09:35) He says that was the first time they attempted to leave Kosovo towards Macedonia. He says that he was thirteen or fourteen-years-old at the time. He says that eight of them crammed in a car drove towards the border to Macedonia. They changed direction several time attempting to avoid danger. They feared that if the car was pulled over by Serbian troops that they may have been shot by the side of the road as they had heard that this was happening to other families.</p> <p>Adonis says that they went to stay with a neighbour's family at the house of an old man that they knew as the Serbian troops had not been there, at that point. He describes five or six students asking to hide in the house as they were being chased so they were told to hide in the loft. Soon after Serbian troops came to the house and ordered them all outside.</p> <p>He says the students were in particular danger as they were seen as KLA soldiers by the Serbian troops.</p> <p>Adonis describes SUVs of troops turning up at the house and the soldiers coming in.</p> <p>(15:25) He says that he was in a room with the women, being a child. He describes the</p>

men being in another room discussing what to do for the best. The students were in the loft.

The Serbian troops accused them of hiding and took the old man outside. Even though they heard a gunshot, the old man had not actually been killed (as they thought from inside the house).

He describes the women and children starting to scream in fear. He says that everybody was told to go outside except his grandma who could not walk as she was paralysed, and blind. She was blinded by a bomb in World War II. They were all, about forty to fifty people crammed in a space of about 10m x 5m lying on the floor with their hands behind their heads.

(18:35) He says that he remembers his father telling his mother to make his little brother, who was about one-year-old, to stop crying so she started breastfeeding him, which worked. The Serbian troops had been getting agitated by the baby's cries and the distress of the wider group. He remembers trying to push his brother underneath him so that if they were hit by bullets his little brother might survive and he would be able to protect him from the bullets with his own body.

He recalls the Serbian troops almost reversing other his elderly uncle but some bags near the car got in the way. He describes a blue eyed Serbian kicking his uncle before he got in the car to reverse over him.

Adonis describes the Serbian troops as constantly shouting abuse at them and telling them that they had asked for this treatment, somehow.

He recalls hearing the N.A.T.O. planes and the bombardment but that it was scary as they were aware the planes could bomb at any time and the noise further angered the Serbian troops that they were with.

Adonis says that they were then told by the Serbian troops to "Go to the train station."

They were told to leave towards Macedonia.

(25:22) He describes the same blue eyed policeman as wanting them to leave his elderly, paralysed grandmother and that he would shoot her for them as he considered she was worthless. Another Serbian soldier had told them to go and get her quickly which they did. They managed to put her in the boot of the car, with the parcel shelf removed so that she could breathe, and they left immediately.

He describes his grandmother's illnesses. She was very ill, blind since World War II, paralysed recently and she had recently deteriorated so her understanding was limited. He considers her his hero though as his grandfather died when he was quite young so she brought all her children up, whilst blind, on her own. Adonis describes her as a very special woman.

Adonis says that it is his grandmother's illnesses that led to the family being medically evacuated to Manchester.

He describes them heading towards the border in three cars and then being redirected onto a potentially dangerous route, by Serb troops. After being told the road ahead had been mined, they drove away but later decided to not head in the direction the troops had told them to go as it was likely they would be killed going in that direction through a 95% Serb populated area. A lot of paramilitaries were known to have come from that region. They then turned around and the Serb policemen who had turned them away had gone so they

drove along that road anyway, even though they had been told it had been mined, as they had no other choice. This road led to them joining a queue with many other cars to Macedonia with other people fleeing Kosovo. He says that they queued there for about a week. He describes them having a little food and water that kept them going for about 4 or 5 days.

Adonis describes his father giving money to a patrolling Serbian soldier who helped them to go towards the front of the queue and how other brave cars followed them.

(32:48) Adonis says that they were then closer to the Macedonian border but it was shut.

He says that they went into empty, roadside Albanian houses to try and find food and that later, after the war, his father went back to thank the owners. They told his father that he was probably the hundredth person to go and thank him as many other people had also gone in his house to find food as well.

Adonis recalls that one day Serbian police told everyone, "Milosevic has resigned. The war is over. Everything is over. Go back. The Serbian Military has taken control of the area of Kosovo. And you're safe now."

He says that as they had no radio to check the information, they didn't know if it was true. He says that they were made to return home, regardless, so they drove away from the border back into Kosovo. Adonis describes still seeing houses burning and they realised that the war was not over at all so they drove back to Pristina to his uncle's flat where they stayed from about April until early May.

He describes it as being near a Serbian police base which had been set up in an emptied block of civilian flats so that they could be embedded, hiding from N.A.T.O planes amongst the civilians, for safety. Adonis says that they came in the flat most days just to check that they were not doing anything untoward. He says that his father was still trying to find a solution to their situation. Whilst his father was driving past police check points, he would pretend to be Serbian by beeping his horn and making supportive hand gestures to the Serbian Police so that they would not stop him and potentially kill him.

(40:06) Adonis describes his father's job before the war as an Executive overlooking several markets in Pristina. He says that he was kicked out of his job in the early Nineties.

He describes his father getting the family tickets for a coach to Macedonia to try to flee Kosovo, again. He says that the second time they were stopped, his cousin's ID was not returned, after a check, because he was from an area known to produce many KLA volunteers.

(42:46) His father spoke to a Serbian soldier who kindly told him to be quiet and wait for it to be returned as if they kicked up a fuss the other troops would use that as an excuse or reason for hurting his cousin. He says that the soldier - possibly a regular rather than the newer drafted in police - had said, "Look, I've got beads in my hand. I've got beads in my hand. I'm not Muslim. I'm Orthodox but these I've got these from that house that you can see across the road and I don't know where that man is, you know, whose beads they are. I don't know where he's left. I don't know. All I found was these beads when I went in there. And they keep me sane." Adonis says that they kept quiet as advised and the ID was eventually returned, the coach set up again and they drove to the Macedonian border.

Adonis describes carrying his grandmother, along with three other relatives, across the border in a sheet as she could not move herself. He was also carrying bags. This group

were allowed through but had to leave many of the family still at the border.

(47:40) Adonis says that they were met by his cousin's husband, who is married in Macedonia, who had driven to the border to meet them. They then went to stay at his house whilst they waited to see where they would be going.

This relative was able to collect the rest of the family. Adonis describes huge relief as the whole family was eventually together again at their cousin's house.

Adonis says that he had an auntie who lived in the U.K. who went over to Macedonia and helped to arrange for the family to go to the U.K. by speaking to the U.N. because their grandmother desperately needed medical help. He says that they were in Macedonia for about ten days before leaving for the U.K.

(50:50) He says he remembers thinking about going to England and driving to the airport. He says that he didn't know they were going to Manchester until he was on the plane and didn't know where it was. He remembers seeing green fields and green scenery.

Adonis remembers the Macedonian flight crew as wearing face masks which upset people. He says that the British landing crew did not wear face masks and also seemed a bit confused and upset that the Macedonian crew would do that.

(55:04) Adonis says this it was 11<sup>th</sup> May when they arrived in the U.K. in one of the earlier waves of refugee arrivals.

He says that they were welcomed warmly and well provided for in the terminal. Adonis says that his mother had lost some bags containing their documentation at the border but that wasn't a problem as other people had done the same.

Adonis talks about going to live at Meadow Court the reception centre in Trafford, Manchester. He remembers it all seeming very surreal as they immediately went from one extreme of compassion to the other. They lived there for about a year or so.

He says that he only spoke a handful of words when he arrived in England in May. He would pick up words playing with the English kids in the park and then they had structured lessons when they began school in September.

Adonis says that they went to Blessed Thomas Holford High School. He says that it's a Sixth Form College now.

He describes going to London to see his auntie in Kensington a week after arriving and that the visit to affluent West London was extraordinary

Adonis talks about his auntie leaving U.K. to go to Macedonia to try and find a way to get the family to safety and medical care for his grandmother. She left her job and husband behind to do this as it was so important to her to help her family. He says that she took all of her saving in case money would be of use.

Adonis says that when they came to Manchester, her grandmother was immediately taken to Wythenshawe hospital and was there for several weeks until her condition improved.

Adonis describes the reception centre and that they were welcomed and provided for really well. He talks very fondly of Reverend Bruce Thompson as being particularly warm, visiting

regularly, arranging trips out and taking them to play with other children at his church.

Adonis talks about starting school in September - about five or six from the same refugee group. He talks about going to certain classes but not all of them at first. They had a medical room with tutor Mr Brown and other support staff would give them extra tuition and help them understand the homework that had been set them.

He talks about studying for his G.C.S.E.s

(01:04:48) Adonis talks about Sister Geraldine and Alison who also helped them with the education at the school and their integration into the wider school. He says that with their help it took him about a year to become fluent in English.

He talks about it being a Catholic school and how they were invited to attend mass. This was an option but he went anyway and he found it a good experience and he learnt about something he previously had no knowledge of.

Adonis describes Blessed Thomas Holford as a good school and that it made no difference that they were Muslim and the school was Catholic. His father had agreed: he was only concerned that it was a good school.

Adonis talks about the Head Teacher, Mr Harris and his warm welcome.

(01:07:42) Adonis talks about his education. He says that in year 9 when they started school, he spoke no English. A year later he was fluent, then he studied 9 G.C.S.E.s and gained six or seven Cs, one B and two or three Ds. Then he went onto Loreto College to study a BTEC in Computing where he got a triple distinction. Adonis then says that he went to Manchester Metropolitan University to study Multimedia Computing for about three or four years.

Adonis talks about the family moving from the reception centre to a house in Timperley.

(01:12: 20) He says that after a year his father returned to Kosovo to try to establish a life for himself and the family there. He says that he wanted to go as well but his parents did not listen to him and he is thankful for that, now. Adonis talks about the family, in the meantime, getting indefinite leave to remain in the U.K. He says that his father re-joined them in Manchester five or six years later.

Adonis says that he now works for a bike insurance broker in Manchester.

Adonis says that he and three other children from the reception centre are still particularly close friends.

He talks about the MaK Cohesion concert, which included a performance from Badly Drawn Boy, at the Lowry in Manchester where they performed a poem that he and other refugee children had written. He talks more about the poem that they wrote at school just after they arrived in Manchester and particularly the line:

*"Twenty thousand hours in a day"*

which represented how slowly time passed when they were in Kosovo during the war.

Adonis says that coming to Manchester and meeting his friends in the reception centre from other parts of Kosovo has shaped his life as that is how he met his wife. Adonis recalls

never wanting to go back to Kosovo when they were fleeing the war to Macedonia. He says that he now likes to go back to Kosovo and see his friends and it will always have a special place in his heart.

Adonis describes seeing such a vast difference, sometimes, when he goes there. He has some friends who drive brand new cars and have everything that they want. But at the same time he has friends who have nothing and who have to make ends meet every single day. He says that it's probably a very small percentage that is very rich and he doesn't think there's a middle class: there's just poverty and extreme wealth. He says that there is a lot of unemployment and corruption in Kosovo at the moment and some people really struggle each day.

(01:21: 10) Adonis says that because he lives in Manchester, England, he sees things differently to his friends who still live in Kosovo. He wishes that they could see what he sees, if only for a day. He wishes they could see a different viewpoint.

Adonis talks about oral history. He believes that sometimes stories are lost in history and forgotten, which he thinks is sad. He says that he has been happy to be involved in the project. Adonis comments that when you see people on the streets in Manchester, no matter where they are from, be they Syrian, Iraqi or English, you don't know their struggles; you cannot make assumptions about their personal stories. He says that it is good to be able to share his memories and his side of the story.

Adonis thanks Pam Dawes and Manchester Aid to Kosovo and also the people of Manchester and the UK for everything they have done over the years. He is grateful for the opportunity to describe his experience as an evacuated refugee and says the support in the UK has been amazing.

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