

Lou Harris interview with Naomi Hamill (15:43)

6th September 2014

(00.00)

LH: I am a teacher and, specifically for this project, I was Head Teacher at Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic High School in Altrincham. I worked in the Manchester area all my teaching career and the last 15 years of my career was as Head of BTH (as it's known to everybody in the area).

I was in my office, as I recall, it was perhaps late Spring/early Summer and I got a telephone call from the local authority and they said to me, "Would you be prepared to accept some refugees in your school?"¹ So I said, "Well, we're full but I'd need to know a little bit more about it." So she told me they were Kosovan young people who were homeless and brought over as a result of the war. And because we were a Catholic school, I asked her if they were Catholics and she said, "Well, no actually, they're Muslims." So I then asked her to tell me a little more about the situation and she told me about the war and that a core group of them had been part of an attempted massacre. So I said I'd get back to her, I asked her for numbers - sorry that's right - and she said, "There are actually about 17 core." But there were a few more who were above school age who needed help."

¹ See Cllr David Acton leader Trafford MBC recording in this archive

(1:39) I then phoned my Chairman of Governors, who was a senior figure in the Church - Monsignor Peter Walton - and I said to him, "I've been approached about accepting refugees. They are Muslims although they are not devout Muslims. We are of course oversubscribed and we will get some backlash if we took them. What do you think?"

So I said, "Well, I think we should take them. They have been in serious trouble and we have the opportunity to help."

And he then said to me, "If, as a Catholic school, we can't accept refugees, we shouldn't be in business."

So we then discussed the fact that we were oversubscribed, and we'd been turning people away for a couple of years, and I knew that we'd get a backlash from it. And he said, "That's my problem, not yours."

So we said we would take them.

Initially, it's a bit confusing because a few of them were still receiving medical treatment. ²**Saranda** was, **Jehona** was, **Fatos** was: for the bullet wounds that they'd sustained in the partial massacre. So they were in and out.

² Saranda, Selatin/,Jehona and Fatos Bogujevci recordings included in this archive

I should say, by the way, that before we finally committed, I went and talked to the staff and told them what we'd been asked to do. They asked some fairly intelligent questions about what it would require from them - most of which I couldn't answer because I didn't know at the time - but they agreed that we should do something about it.

And two distinct groups arrived. The first was the school age children amongst which were a number of who had physical wounds: the Bogujevci children. So we saw them only partially, to begin with, because they were in and out of hospital receiving medical treatment.

And then there was a group of about ten, perhaps twelve, who were anything between sixteen and early twenties and they had limited experience of schooling because their schools had been closed down. So all we did was - whilst negotiations were going on to find them a more practical residence - we offered them some sort of experience of schooling. So our handicraft department did some cookery with them, some metal work projects and there were some English lessons offered to them. And they came in part of the time for specific things, and went again. And they were really nice and interesting people and, some of them, highly intelligent who needed a more challenging experience than we were able to offer them.

The school age children were somewhat different. They all had some English, but not much, so we got from the local authority a person who was qualified

to teach English as a second language. And he came and joined the staff for a while: a man called Bernard Brown, who was an excellent teacher and fully committed himself, not just in terms of education but also in terms of social support. He visited the children in the place that they were given to live and involved himself in all sorts of ways. He did a great, great deal for the children. He actually taught himself a bit of Kosovan in order that he could reciprocate, in their language occasionally.

(05:45) And it developed from there; gradually they came into the school full time.

In all the time they were at the school - while I was there - on not one occasion did the children fall out or did the Kosovans fall out with the other children in the school. They fully joined in the life of the school and it was a really, really encouraging experience for everybody concerned. They actually joined in the religious ceremonies and in fact produced the liturgy for one mass where they talked about their own experience to the rest of the school. And I was very surprised, but delighted, the way the whole school community responded. But that was more a credit to the children, the young people concerned, than it was to the rest of us, I think, because they were excellent in the way they coped.

The group of post school age children (sixteen plus) we eventually negotiated - and I was involved in this and I didn't really like the experience -

with the local sixth form college. And sadly, I don't think the people who were dealing with the children in the sixth form college understood just how intelligent they were, because I think they pitched the education experience they offered them at too low a level.

Our own children stayed with us right the way through to the statutory school leaving age and then, without exception, went on to Sixth Form College and, most of them, to university. Although one or two of them did go back briefly to Kosovo, I think only one of the children who stayed with us is still in Kosovo; all the rest are still in England.

The word spread - we didn't make too big a deal about it - but I think that the word spread about what was happening in Kosovo and about some of the experiences that happened there. So people became aware of the fact that other people had a very different life experience from them. And although you read about these things, and you hear about, or see them on television, the reality of it doesn't come home until you're actually talking to people. And perhaps - as you did with Saranda - saw the bullet wounds and listened to the tales.

I must say, part of that was that all the children were quite good with art, and Saranda and Jehona in particular. And one of Saranda's major GCSE pieces was a sort of elliptical sculpture made of chicken wire. And on that chicken wire she's posted things: part written messages; part pictures; part childhood

toys. And it was really to encapsulate her life. And the idea of the sculpture, as it emerged from the base, was to say how her life had developed and blossomed to where she was.

(09:10) But one of the things that were actually written on that sculpture was: 'You can never understand what it's like when you see, next to you, your baby brother with a bullet wound in his head.'

I don't think anybody saw that without being moved.

And so it wasn't just an increase in understanding, it was also the fact that these young people, who were excellent characters, had had a horrific experience and taught the rest of the school through the way they conducted themselves, I think.

I think it's a great credit to them but also a great credit to the people who have worked with them. The local authority, I have to say on this occasion, did produce amazing support. When the Kosovans first arrived they had nowhere to live, of course, and immediately finding 20/30 people homes was quite difficult. But they had a disused old folks home which they did up very quickly and moved the Kosovan community into there. So they had their own community sort of place. And that was excellent! They did support the school, extremely well, providing us with some support for the pupils that we couldn't offer them. And there was never any question of them withdrawing

that support - even as the children became more competent as they got older - until we actually said, "We think that this is ok". And the people then moved on to other challenges, I suppose.

MaK³ had worked before the children came to the school: they had taken convoys across and I had heard about that. And then I began to meet, in my own visits to the Kosovar community, people like **Pam** and **Paul**⁴, and they came into school to talk to me on a couple of occasions. So we gave them what support we could and we talked to them about the children. We went to mutually social occasions. And I promised that, when I had time, I would become involved. So gradually, once I retired, I then started going to Kosovo a little bit and getting involved with the work of MaK.

(12:00) It was very interesting... and I'm trying to martial the different thoughts really. First of all, the people were excellent: we didn't have any problems with the people at all other than when working with the municipality. I always felt there was a question of face so they wouldn't not promise you things that they knew, very well, they often couldn't deliver. Part of that was structural problems: the local community had no money of its own. There were no taxes. So consequently any money got was from central government. And central government didn't always deliver when they should have done. So

³ <http://www.makonline.org>

⁴ Pam Dawes and Paul Guest recordings included in this archive

although the municipality might have wanted to support us they actually probably couldn't, because of not having money.

But we were actually.... on many occasions, people from MaK in Kosovo were accosted by people on the street who thanked us for the work that we were doing. The handicaps that they had in terms of work were colossal - little things that don't occur to us. For example, there was no garbage collection, no refuse collection service in Kosovo. So, in Podujeva - the town where we spent most of our time - there was one particular street and, for ten yards either side of the street, there was just mounds of refuse because there was nowhere else to put it. And things like that don't occur to you until you're actually there.

Handicapped people just had a hut really, which was dilapidated and falling to pieces, because there was no service for them to be looked after. So you begin to realise how fortunate and privileged we are when you come to that situation. But the positive attitude and the pleasantness and the welcome that we got, from everybody concerned, was really impressive.

(14:08) I'm very grateful that we had the opportunity. I think it enriched the school community. It's been a real pleasure to meet the children and their families and to be involved with them over the last 15 years. The trips to Kosovo have always been interesting and rewarding. I think that personally

and as a community – as a school community - we got far more out of it than we gave.

My first hand contact with the consequences of the massacres of this Scorpion brigade and the first was when I went into the residential compound that the Bogujevcis had and I actually saw, still, the bullet wounds in the wall, in the corner where the children were shot and their mothers and aunties, and brothers and sisters were killed. That was an extremely moving experience.

And the second was that on three occasions now, I have been present at the memorial service for, not only the Bogujevcis, but for the other family⁵ whose family members were massacred by this brigade.

And again, to see the way the people turned out, and the sense of community that you saw in that town, was hugely impressive and very moving.

⁵ The Duriqi family. See Selatin/Jehona Bogujevci recording in this archive