

ORAL HISTORY INDEX AND SUMMARY

Interview with: Rev. Bruce Thompson

Date: 8/4/15

Location: Sheffield

Total duration: 54.14 mins

Interview by Pam Dawes and summary by Kelly Bücher:

The interview plays as one long recording.

1.	Start time	Finish time	Approximate duration	Brief description
	00.00	54.14	54.14	Rev. Bruce Thompson talks about helping to set up a refugee reception centre in Manchester during the Kosovan war and his deep friendships with the people he met there and his invitation to Kosovo.
Pen sketch	<p><i>Rev Bruce Thompson is married and currently lives in Lincoln where he is Chair of Lincolnshire Methodist District. Bruce was Minister of Timperley Methodist Church in 1999 when the British government made the decision to evacuate Kosovars as part of the global humanitarian response to help the survivors from the war in Kosovo, forced out off their own land. The North West was designated the location for refugees where at least one family member had a special need: often medical. Bruce suggested to his local authority, Trafford MBC, that a disused building in his area could be converted for incoming families. This was accepted. The church and the wider community got to work. Families started to arrive, mainly from the border camps, in May 1999. The last family to arrive were the Bogujevcis which included five injured children and two traumatised, widowed fathers. Bruce visited all the families, almost daily, and played a huge part in their recovery. His church, Timperley Methodist, became the focus for games, trips, friendships and integration with local people. Bruce was later invited to Kosovo by his friends and also wrote a book "Shelter from the storm" containing both their life stories, and his own personal journey.</i></p>			
Summary of interview content	<p>(00.00) Reverend Bruce Thomson introduces himself and explains that he is now the Chair of the Methodist Church, Lincolnshire District. But, at the time of the Kosovar war, he was the Minister of the Methodist Church in Timperley, South Manchester.</p> <p>Several gentlemen who came as refugees to Manchester are also present at this particular interview: Safet and Selatin Bogujevci and Banush.</p> <p>Bruce talks about seeing a Channel 4 documentary entitled 'Death in the Valley' in February 1999 about the Drenica Valley, which depicted horrendous suffering and violence.</p>			

As the days and weeks progressed, he talks about becoming increasingly concerned about the situation, horrified that people were being forced from their homes and villages. He talks about leading his congregation in abstinence of the bread and wine during communion and to consume imaginary elements in empathy with those suffering in Kosovo.

Bruce talks about spending time thinking about how best to help the refugees and people hiding in mountains and fleeing Kosovo. He and others began to wonder how they could do what they could in order to provide shelter, food and drink for those who had fled the killings and the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.

He says that it was about three weeks later that he heard of the Manchester Aid to Kosovo convoy setting off which was on April 23rd, St George's Day, and he went along. He says he was about to be inducted, a couple of weeks later, as Chaplain to the Mayor of Trafford and went in an unofficial capacity at that point.

(05.50) Bruce remembers praying for the safety of the convoy but admits that would not have been much use on it himself, in his opinion. He says that he was talking about the situation with the refugees with his congregation when one of the women suggested that Meadow Court, a disused building, might be of some use. He says that he went on his bike to have a look at it and then contacted the new Mayor of Trafford, Councillor Ray Bowker, who immediately gave him the Director of Social Services' home telephone number. He says he called him later that night and Meadow Court was added to a list of sites for the British Refugee Council to consider in their housing plans for any refugees.

He was soon informed that Meadow Court had been put at the top of the list of suitable buildings to suit the refugee housing needs in Manchester, the peaceful setting, residential accommodation, communal rooms, office, space for people to exercise and for children to play.

(11.40) Bruce describes preparing Meadow Court as a place for refugees from Kosovo to live in Manchester. It needed a lot of work to make it habitable for people and volunteers worked day and night to make it happen in time for the first flight arriving on May 12th.

(14.34) He talks about his first impressions of the refugees when they first arrived. He describes people in a state of shock and being dazed. Their main aim was to initially meet the core needs of people such as shelter, food and drink. He discussed various people having different approaches to the situation and experiencing different responses to the refugees.

Bruce talks about some people coming to Manchester with special needs; they were selected specially from camps as Manchester was able to meet their

particularly specialised needs, for example, medically. He mentions that one of these families was the Bogujevci family who had been involved in a massacre in their hometown. He describes a man, Mr Sulejman who had lost his teeth due to a beating.

(18.39) He mentions one of the women with special needs, Adriana, having leukaemia and he ponders whether the shock of the war may have triggered the illness.

(22.30) Bruce talks about the Bogujevci children who acted with immense maturity. He talks about a boy, Adonis, commenting on how English children were only interested in music and football and how his experiences of the war had created a difference perspective for him and some of the other children.

(26.44) Bruce discusses interfaith relations and communications as a lot of the refugees were Muslim but people from all different faiths were helping and assisting them in Manchester. He talks about seeing one particular Muslim woman, from an Islamic Association, at a meeting in Manchester, challenging a man from her own community.

Bruce comments that the Kosovan Albanians that came to Meadow Court on the whole being, nominally Muslim, had faced ethnic cleansing by people who were in the main, Serb Orthodox Christian.

He talks about being interested in the holocaust and it occurred to him that 6 million Jews and countless millions of others had been transported, selected and executed by the main baptised Christians.

He felt that there was another attempted genocide, right on his doorstep. Bruce comments that religion can be simultaneously both the solution and the problem.

(34.54) He talks about compassion fatigue, need, and appealing for longer term security for the families.

Bruce talks about the repercussions of war and the trauma involved for survivors. Bruce says that each and every one of the families at Meadow Court were there was a good reason and that their needs needed to be met over a number of years not a short period time, not soon after the actual war had ended. He talks about how potentially catastrophic it could have been for a number of families had they been returned to Kosovo soon after the actual conflict had ended. He talks about the fact that refugees are not the drain on

resources that some media like to make out.

He talks about Meadow Court being an unusual, perhaps unique experience in that they created a single community, a family where each person's needs were met by those who could meet them. People played to their strengths and helped each other. He says that when people started moving out of Meadow Court into their own local housing for each family, that there was fresh grief as people had become so tight-knit in their community and through the trauma they had suffered together.

(39.00) He talks about how he appealed on behalf of the families, wrote to politicians, and gathered together support for the families to stay longer in the UK. He talks of feeling an enormous joy when appeals were granted so that people could remain in the country. It says it was a terrific sense of fulfilment after all of that.

(39.36) Bruce talks about being invited to Kosovo by people who he had met and helped. It was only when he was on a sabbatical from the Methodist Church that he had some time away from the church and was able then to travel to Kosovo with Selatin and two of his boys. He describes it as being an extraordinary experience, being overwhelmed by the hospitality and how he felt very humbled.

He says that it was also traumatic as he was able to visit Drenica which was the scene of the massacre that he had seen on TV in February 1999, the thing that began his interest in Kosovo. He talks of how he was also able to visit the Bogujevci family home and the site of the massacre, just a few yards away, and he remembers standing there with a rambling rose against the wall, against which the children and the women had been placed before being shot and there were rose petals all over the floor which was very symbolic to him. Bruce still carries two rose petals from the garden, in his wallet.

He talks about his faith, other faiths and mindfulness. He discusses meeting holocaust survivors, and then those of people who survived the war in Kosovo.

(45.57) Bruce talks about having written a book called 'Shelter from the storm' subtitled 'Caring for the victims of Kosovo'. He says that he was encouraged by his friends at Meadow Court to write it as they wanted their stories to be told and they wanted him to tell their stories. Each chapter begins with a relevant quotation. He says that when helping others you as much as the giver as the receiver.

Safet Bogujevci expresses his gratitude for Bruce's care. Safet says he believes God called Bruce to care for his people in Manchester.