

Blerina Bujupi interview with Naomi Hamill (32.28)

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My family is originally from a little village called Arllat which is in Drenica. That's where we lived with all my uncles and aunties and my grandparents until I was about nine and then me and my mum and dad and my two brothers moved to a little town called Drenas. And that's where I lived up until the war: until '99.

Our family was... it was one of the lucky families because we had a very happy childhood. Me and my brothers grew up around lots of people: lots of relatives. And when we think about it, when we talk about it, all we can remember is laughing a lot: having a lot of fun playing with each other. Our dad was the oldest kid in his family so everyone couldn't wait to meet his kids [younger brothers and sisters] and talk to his kids. And we were very, very lucky. I mean, we didn't really realise it growing up, because we thought every kid is like that and every kid gets treated like with so much respect, but now looking back, we realise that we were just... we were living the best life possible back home, and that we had the best childhood.

(1:20)It was just a normal... really... a normal kind of month. I remember we were going to school, you know, normal, like we did every day and, one day, we just remember that school was being closed all of a sudden. We were in our lessons and the teacher said we had to all go home because the schools were closing. And we were just, like, 'Well why?' We didn't understand. I was maybe thirteen then, and we were sent home and, "Your parents are going to explain. You have to go home."

All of a sudden, the town was kind of flooded with tanks and military equipment and soldiers, Serbian soldiers, and we were starting to get the

picture. Apparently, there had been an attack the night before in a village and someone had killed some of the Serbian soldiers. On the other hand, there were some casualties on, you know, the KLA¹ side. We had no idea who the KLA was or what was going on, back then. But obviously people who had been kind of expecting this and, you know, getting ready for this war. But the majority of people had no clue. So that's all I can remember: just seeing loads and loads of tanks driving through one morning and they didn't stop all day.

And from that day on, we were at war. It was just as sudden as that.

(02:58) We didn't go to school for a while. Then we kind of went back for a bit. It depended on how the situation was in the actual town. Some days we would be at school. It'd be fine. Some days we couldn't leave our house because it was that dangerous. Something had happened the night before. But it affected us in so many ways.

We couldn't move freely: we couldn't even go to see our grandparents because there had been some fighting, you know somewhere on the way there. There was a particular bad kind of attack in the village nearby and we were too afraid to go out, because the way it worked - the way it went - they were kind of shooting at anyone at any point. So you were never safe.

(04:00) There was a part... well there was a time when we were kind of locked in, in our flat. We couldn't go outside. We couldn't go to get food: all the shops were closed. Then there was another time when we found ourselves living in a mountain with just trees, you know: there was nothing else. There was no houses; there was just the trees and a river, I remember, flowing by.

¹ Kosova Liberation Army

And there were times when we were living in other people's homes in other cities, kind of running and just finding shelter somewhere and running to another place; shelter there a few days there; then it got bad there and we moved again. There was just a lot of that until we were finally kicked out. We were all packed into a train and driven out of the country. So from that day, when we were sent home from school, to the day that we left, it was about a year of constantly running away. Constantly setting up somewhere: kind of lucky to be alive: lucky to escape one battle... another... another. We were very lucky to escape all of them unharmed and none of our family members were harmed. Everyone survived.

It's a miracle how we did survive! Lots of people didn't. Lots of people were caught up in something that they didn't understand. Lots of families, lots of kids who were just playing around in their garden were shot at. And it was not fair. And it was something that even though it was happening to us, we just didn't understand why it was happening to us.

It wasn't a war. Because wars, you see in movies everywhere, are between armies. This was not like that. This was soldiers shooting at civilians everywhere they saw them. Everywhere, you know... you were never safe. So we just... you know...

I was always quite, kind of, a closed person. I kept myself to myself. I kept my feelings to myself. I didn't really talk too much to people – obviously, with my family - but I tried to think more and talk less. I was very into reading. I read a lot. So I remember, I didn't understand what was going on so I just shut it out. I just closed myself up to all of that and I tried to go, to kind of escape, to different worlds, through books mainly. We didn't have TV. We had TVs - we didn't really have electricity. And at some point we were actually on a hill looking down at our village and our house being burnt down. So you know,

we... you couldn't just be yourself. You couldn't just carry on as normal, seeing all of that around you. So I just tried to just escape.

(07:12) In my head, I was already dead. I was... so was everyone from my family, so as soon as you tell yourself that you just, kind of, live every day as it comes by. And you just try and make the most of every day because you think: *Oh, I made it through another day.* So that's all I did. I took... everyone was taking bread, clothes, to the mountains. I was taking books. Because I knew that without books, I would be forced to look at, you know, this terror all around us. And I remember sitting in a field, a hill, when we lived in the mountains for a few months... I think it was... and reading this book which was not even that interesting. And I was so into this story that I just didn't hear anything. I couldn't hear anything around me and there was constantly... there was bombing, shooting, constantly going on and my mum had to come and grab me to pull me inside, to pull me to shelter because I was that close to, I think it was - I don't know if it was shootings or flames I don't really know what was going on - but I was so into my book, I was just like, 'No! I'm not having any of this! You can kill each other. You can shoot. I'm just going to read my book' (laughs). It was a way of surviving. Just pretend you're somewhere else.

(08:49) Some days - it depended where we went - if we were going to my grandmother's house, we knew that at least there was food. There were people there. It was a familiar setting. If there was anything, we'd know where to hide or which direction to run. But some days it was just: *Grab anything you can and run.*

(09:23) You never knew where your next meal was coming from. I remember, we lived on the siege, the apartment siege, we were there for at least a month, I think, I can't quite remember. But I remember the last few days and all we had was corn and that's how we survived.

We could not just pop to the shop: there was nothing. We had to carry water, we had to... we had a little wood burner inside the flat because there was no electricity. You just never knew what conditions you were going to find wherever you went. Sometimes it was difficult: sometimes it was ok. It was never good.

I mean, there's a lot that happened and there's so many experiences and I just can't kind of pick one now but it was, for a young girl, it was difficult. I mean, as difficult as it is for a grownups, for my parents, it was difficult for my parents because they had to get their kids out of their home, and take them out and, you know, protect them on the way. But for us, me and my brothers, it was just... it was kind of a scary adventure. It was, because it was an adventure. But it was so, so scary. Obviously, our dad, our mum and dad, knew what could happen, or they had an idea of what would happen when we went out when we were not supposed to, or what would happen, you know, if there was a bombing near our house or something. We had no idea. You don't, when you're a kid, you don't know all of this.

(11:10) So we were just kind of, as things were happening, we were just like: *Wow! So that's what it's like to go through this.* And it was quite, quite scary for us, to just be faced with new things constantly. And not very nice things either. So the way that we, kind of, experienced it was different to the way that our parents experienced it. We had to find, kind of find a way to understand it quickly, because we'd not heard about it, we'd not really read about wars that much. I mean, what do you know about wars when you are a teenager? You don't know much apart from history books and that's something that happened a long time ago, somewhere far, far away and you don't really take it to heart.

But, you know, it's different when you're being faced with it all of a sudden. And you just have to be strong. You know, how do you, how do you find the

strength to just say: *Ok, I can do this...* how do you not just freak out and how do you keep in control?

Our parents did a great job of talking to us. Taking helped a lot: they sat us down and they just told us what they knew, in a way that we would understand - that it is a very dangerous situation that we're in and it might just be that we're going to see some things that we're not going to be comfortable with or something might happen to one of us. And something nearly did happen to us when they came into the flat, which was a terrifying experience.

(12:45) That was one incident, which stands out, actually, thinking back. It was when we, kind of, in the siege, and they came in looking for gold. They were looking for jewelry. They were looking for food, even though we had a limited amount. So they came in and they were asking my dad for money. We were all sat down in the living room. Two men fully, you know, armed. They came in and they were asking for money. My dad was saying, "We don't have," you know, "we don't have any money. We haven't left the flat in months, we don't have anything."

And they saw that - my brother's are twins - so they saw that there was something similar about them. So they took one of them, **Bled**². They took him away and they sat him down in a chair. So they were like, "Right, you're either going to find us something or you're not going to see one of your sons again." And we were just like: *Ok... so...* I, obviously, I had this kind of ability to just shut it all out, to just kind of concentrate on like something on the carpet, or whatever, 'cause I just could not deal with it. But my dad, it was very tough on my dad because he was just like, "I really don't have any." And I don't know whether they were going to do that, whether that was just, kind of, a test to see whether my dad would say, "Oh, actually, I have loads of money,

² Bled Bujupi recording included in this archive

there you go." But they did that just to provoke us you know. Bled was young: he didn't know what was going on. I remember him smiling at us (laughs) because he thought... he probably thought it was a game and he was chosen for something... I don't know. But it was terrifying for us and for my mum and dad, especially.

Shortly after that, they just left. They couldn't get anything. We didn't have anything. So they just left so we went back to normal. Whatever normal was. It was a terrifying experience knowing that they could have just pulled out a gun, there and then, and we couldn't have done anything. But that's it.

(14:56) As I said, our family... we were quite lucky not to actually be in direct, kind of fire - in the line of fire - because we could hear it, all around us. We'd actually - on that particular day - we'd heard a shooting on the flat opposite. And I, I think that was just a form of scaring everyone; I don't think anyone actually got shot but it was enough to scare us. So people running - we saw houses being burnt, you know - but we didn't actually encounter anything more.

After the siege we were all driven in buses to Prishtina, actually, to Fushë Kosova which is the train station. We were all driven there. We were just told that we had to get out. I remember, as we were boarding the buses that they, that the Serb police, had brought up... in, for us we were asked to pay. We were asked to pay either with money, with food or with jewelry.

Yes, I know, it's crazy!

I particularly remember that because I lost my favourite pair of gold earrings. But they saved my life, really. So we all had to give something to them for kicking us out which was not fair but there was absolutely nothing that we could do. We could protest but we'd be shot. So we did what we had to do.

(16:40) We were all boarded onto these buses and taken to the train station, put on a train and then out of Kosovo into Macedonia. And I remember we waited on the border for five hours: a packed train, five hours. And it was just the most ridiculous situation to be in: kids crying; people being sick; old people not feeling very well, feeling tired; most of the people didn't have a seat, they were standing up on a train. It was terrible. And then we were driven into the camps: refugee camps.

But it was just, "Get out!" Really just, "Get out!" They didn't really care in what condition we were getting out of Kosovo. It was just ... their job was just to take us out of the border.

(17:40) Our family didn't stay there because we had relatives in Macedonia so we were driven to the refugee camp but we never actually made it inside. So we took a taxi with the last money we had left and, I think, we couldn't even manage to pay that, (laughs) the total. So we were just driven to the town where we knew people and we were there for a few days, maybe a few weeks. And then one evening my dad said, "We're going to England tomorrow." And it was just a shock! (laughs) I knew a few English words from school so I was looking forward to using them (laughs) but we didn't know anything about England. Most people didn't even know where England was. We didn't know anything about where we were going. So yeah, that was it.

We found out at six o' clock in the evening that they were looking for people to take³. Other countries were, you know, looking to take some of the

³ see MaK timeline in this archive: In a global humanitarian response to the conflict, the British government evacuates dispossessed Kosovars to Manchester, Leeds and Scotland. 4,346 of the most vulnerable men, women and children are selected from refugee camps. 2,400 arrive in the North West. "*People had few belongings, what they brought with them instead was bewilderment and dignity, grief and dispossession.*" ('My Name Came up' Refugee Council, 2000)

refugees and give them homes. So we were just selected to go to England. I don't know how they made that selection. It was... we were a big family.

(19:00) So six o' clock in the next morning, we were driving to the airport; we were put on a plane and we landed in Manchester. And I remember, I was one of the first people to get out of the plane, and there were a few elderly ladies waiting for us just at the bottom of the plane. I don't know who they were. I don't know how they were allowed to get in there and wait for us but we didn't land the normal - we didn't get out of the airport the normal way - we were kind of 'escorted'. But I remember this lady hugged me so tight, I was like: *Do I know this lady? Where am I?* It was evening and it was like... I was very, very, kind of, in shock. I was like: *How does this lady know me and why is she hugging me so much? Why does she suddenly love me so much?* It was so nice.

And the difference from where we were and when we landed in Manchester, the first thing I noticed was: *Why are there so many street lights and why are they all on?* Because we'd had had no electricity for almost a year. Wasting electricity on street lamps was just too strange to me (laughs). It was so strange but it's the first thing I noticed.

(20:23) Everything shocked me, everything! As soon as we landed here, my eyes kind of opened. I was not the same anymore. I was... I didn't need to close myself up anymore. I knew I was safe. I knew straight away that I was safe. At least, no one was running, and no one was trying to kill us here. We were safe. Everyone was trying to help us. Everyone was trying to feed us, clothe us, make us happy. So I kind of... it's like waking up and opening your eyes and seeing everything around you. And everything was new; everything from the streets, to the driving on the wrong side of the street. That was scary! (laughs) And so our journey from Manchester to Barrow, I just thought, *this*

driver has lost it (laughs). I didn't know that they drive on the other side of the street here!

I didn't know much about England. I knew it rained a lot: I didn't know anything else. Everything was different. When we went to school - the classrooms; the teachers; the way they spoke to you and to everyone - the way you were encouraged to do something and, if you showed interest in something, you were just immediately met with encouragement. No one was trying to say, "Oh, no, you can't do that," straight away - because over time with going through that a lot, on everything - so just being encouraged to do everything that you want to do, it was great.

(22:10) So we were just driven, driven to this refugee centre somewhere in Manchester. I can't remember where it was, spent a few hours there. I wasn't fed soup because they thought I was one of the English girls helping out because I had ginger hair. So I was like, 'Where is my soup?' (laughs). And then we were driven to Ulverston in Cumbria, the same night, to a converted school. They converted it into a refugee centre. We spent a year in there and it was very happy, very happy year.

It was a big family. It was like attending a family wedding that lasted a year (laughs) because everyone had their rooms, their bed; everyone had their little spaces and then there was a communal space where we had our dinners. And everything was prepared for us. We were brought in clothes every day, we were brought in toiletries, everything that we needed and we were treated with so much respect from everyone who came into help - mostly volunteers - that we were in heaven. We were just like, "What did we do to deserve all this?" You know, we'd been through so much, but you know, that doesn't mean that people are going to be nice to you. Even though you've been through something doesn't automatically mean that

people will respect you for it. But they did and it was great. Four months later, we went to school; I went to year 11, straight into year 11 and did 6 GCSEs.

I mean, I was quite good at English before at school, from school, but then it's a different level going into a British classroom. But I picked it up quite quickly but I don't know how. And I managed to pass my exams and most of, all of my classmates had already had a year to prepare for them, year 10, and I was just straight into year 11, just, "Do them" and I did them. And I don't know how I did them but I did (laughs).

(24:25) To start with, it was strange because we were new. When people hear 'refugees', I know it's terrible, but automatically they think, 'they're going to look different', you know, 'they're going to look different from us, they're going to be different', and then we walked in and, as I said, I had ginger hair and no one really believed that I was not English (laughs). So we walked in, especially, wearing uniform, looking the same as their classmates, and everyone was like, 'Oh, ok, so not that different'. So they started talking to us, they were very keen, asking lots of questions. Ulverston is a small place so people are very interested to know what you're like, you know, what you do, your story and everything. And yeah, we had a great time at school and at college. And you know most people were great and understanding but there was the odd one who would, kind of, shout out something that we didn't understand. Everyone else, well we knew from everyone's reaction it wasn't very nice but, you know, you get that with everyone really, not just us.

And yeah, me and my brothers were brought up in a creative home. Our dad is an architect and my mum's a social worker so we were always encouraged to do something, create something, not just sit there. Just do something with whatever you've got. So when we moved to Barrow, a year later, we decided, this is a new place even though it's the next town. It's a new place and we still carry that label of 'Refugees' with us. And we were

starting college and I was just a little bit concerned of how we were going to be perceived. So we thought: *What would be the best way to just connect to our age group and just tell people who we are?*

(26:30) So we heard about the Prince's Trust⁴ and we thought up a plan. We thought: *We'll do a magazine and we'll do it in two languages and we'll just tell our story. We'll just put something about Kosovo, something about our culture, maybe a little interview with one of us: just basic information. And we applied for the funding, and we got it, and we all got together with lots of other kids who were from the Kosovar families.*

(27:00) I was the editor, 'cause I was doing media, so that was my job to get things in order (laughs). And we did that. And we did a few issues of that. It was a free magazine. Because we were being sponsored, we didn't really need to sell it: we just wanted people to know us, for us. So we took it all round the schools, libraries, all round Barrow and then it ended up being, kind of, taken into other places around Cumbria. And it was great because people were more familiar with us as a community, a new community. There was quite a lot of us; maybe 300 people originally, maybe more. So for a little town, it's quite a shock to get that many people. We just thought: *We'll do this as a way of explaining who we are and why we've suddenly come here*⁵.

After living in Barrow for a few years I went to University in Carlisle. The reason why I went there was because it was the only University who accepted me as a Home Student because, back then, I didn't have a British Passport so everywhere else I was an Overseas Student. And they were very understanding, so they took me in and they let me pay less.

⁴ <https://www.princes-trust.org.uk>

⁵ The magazine project was a winner of the 2003 PhilipLawrence Award. It was presented to the school student Kosovar journalists by SirTrevor McDonald and the then Home Secretary David Blunkett MP. <http://www.philiplawrenceawards.net/projects/kosovars-in-barrow/>

(28:30) And my family? My dad got a job in Manchester as an architect and my brothers went to University in Manchester, so they moved here. After Uni, I came back home and I got married and now I live ten minutes away from my mum which is a great help with the kids. But, yeah, I decided to stay here. My husband came over from Kosovo six/seven years ago now and he liked Manchester as well. We found that it was the best place for us. We like a little bit of the adventure and the culture but we like the quiet life as well so a bigger city was definitely not for us. So we found that Manchester had everything we wanted.

(29:22) I do go back. I go back every year, more than once if I can. First time I went back was 2004. So after 5 years, it was amazing to go back and see the country that I'd left burning. By then it was rebuilding itself and there was lots of things going on and it was so... such a happy place to be and I, I just, I didn't know how I was going to feel going back because I'd left it in such a state. And you know I, when I left, I really didn't think I would go back ever again so going back and actually having a good time was amazing. And we went back every year.

We've got family there: my husband's family are there. Especially since we've had the kids, we try to go back and take them, teach them all about, you know, what we know and take them to see places where we grew up and tell them about it. We talk about it a lot, although we talk in English because our kids do not want to speak Albanian (laughs). I don't know why. They understand it. If we tell them something, they definitely understand it. They do not want to reply in Albanian so we speak English (whispers and laughs). They love it as well: they can't wait to go every year. It's a happy experience.

(31:00) I actually can't wait to tell them. I can't wait for them to be old enough to tell them. I don't know how I'm going to tell them. I don't know

whether I could sit down with them and tell them, as I'm talking to you now, because it's different. When they see me, they see their mum and they don't see this person who has gone through a lot, you know. So all of a sudden to turn around and tell them, "Actually, you might not know that this and this happened." But I don't know, I've been thinking about this and I've actually started to write it down and I thought maybe if they get it in the form of a journal or a book, or something, they can just read for themselves and then we can talk about it. But to sit down and all of a sudden and tell them, it's just... I don't know whether I'd be able to do it. But I will definitely tell them somehow.

That's, kind of, it, in a nutshell.

I try not to think too much, not go back too often or think too much because it is part of my life but it's not a part that I'd like to, you know, bring it up a lot. There is a time and place. Obviously, this is one of them. But after this, I wouldn't really go back to it. I would probably think about it tonight.