

Bledar Bujupi interview with Naomi Hamill. (23.59)

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I was born in Prishtina, which is the capital of Kosovo. And I moved here when I was thirteen, thirteen years old.

I suppose you have to split it in two. It's kinda life before the war and during the war, because the war lasted two years. So yeah, I grew up in a city, a medium size city, I suppose. But we also had family in the village so I kinda grew up in the village and the city, so it kinda mixed it up. It was a simple childhood, I suppose, you know go to school, normal life as you'd expect. It's in a part of the world where a summer is a summer (laughs), where you can go and swim if you wanted to or a winter is a winter (laughs) where it would snow a lot. So it's you know... it's a kinda, it's an interesting childhood because of these mixture of all the experiences and yeah, it was good, just simple, simple childhood.

I think, as a kid you are protected from your family because they will probably hear it in the news, small incidents happening that they wouldn't obviously talk about them in front of the kids. So you wouldn't know. I was ten maybe, yeah I was about nine or ten, when you begin to hear incidents like, I think one night, we were sleeping and you hear gunshots and then you wake up the next morning and you realise it was an attack on, you know, a house from Serb forces, you know, going to arrest people at night, maybe. So you hear about it on the news, it's like an incident which happens once every four months, for example, you know. You hear it every four months and then it starts to be more frequent. So instead of it happening every four months, it happens every week and it kinda builds up from one small incident to a more and more incidents. Er, then you hear on the news about, I think they started to close universities down. So it, it's like phase, I suppose. So you begin to experience simple things which don't affect your life as much to where you

see people, you know closed, schools being shut down as they are taught in Albanian. So it's a bit of an, I suppose it's discrimination. It's a bit, I mean, we used to learn about the Jewish people in Germany, before the war, how you would, they would start to get... slowly get harassed. Slowly close down their business, and arrest, you know, arrest the politicians. So it's the same kind of steps which were being taken, but we didn't realise, we didn't think that far. And then, obviously, and then the war kinda.... So you know, all these incidents kinda, usually begin with arresting people and then it ends up with people actually being killed and then you kinda... that's when people rise up and say something's not right here. I think it's part of, just part of the first episode of the war, I suppose.

(4:03) I think I would consider myself quite lucky because we all survived which is obviously a lucky part of any war. And because we were kids you experience it differently, I suppose, you know, because your family, as an adult you will know more about certain things and what could happen. As a kid... when you are, nine years old is not really a kid, but it's kind of an in between age when you don't, you know, you think but you don't know what could happen. So we lived in a village which was attacked and then we had to escape to the mountains, stay there for a couple of days. And then we went back to a flat that we had in a city called Drenas, Drenas it's called now, so that's where we had a flat and we stayed there. It was... so the war lasted two years so over the two years we moved from the village mountain and then went to the flat, so it's a bit of a, you know, you spent two months there, two months there. And then in the flat I would stay about, I'd say, about five or six months maybe. It was a sieged town so basically no one could leave, no one could come in. So that's probably that's where I experienced the war the most.

(5:35) The town was, it was, it was surrounded by Serb soldiers so no one could leave from the civilians and no one could get in. So that's where most of the time went, like my experience of the war.

For the first few weeks you don't notice it. Obviously, your parents say that you can go outside the building but you can't walk around on your own because the chances are, you may, a sniper may shoot you...I don't know... you may just disappear (laughs). You know, it is a war zone so it's a bit, you know, unpredictable.

And where we were, you have incidents where you have soldiers with masks turning up outside the, on the road, outside the... They just come out and start shooting in the air and they just start shouting, 'This is what we're going to do to you, we're going to do this, this, this and this.' Just letting people know, I think it's a tactic to frighten people, but, as I say, when you're a kid, I suppose you block a few things out so it almost seems like a dream because I think it's a way of coping with things and I suppose the adults experience it more because they know the dangers which everyone's in.

(7:10) And then, there were a few instances where the Serb soldiers would come into each building, they go house, flat by flat, and they would take a person of the family ransom, in front of everyone, and they would say, 'You have to give us x amount of money if you want to let them go.' So they would do that a few times, obviously it's another way for them to scare people as well as steal.

I was twelve years when they got me in front of the family and then they said, obviously, 'You have to pay x amount of money if you want to let me go'. And my parents - I think my mum had some jewellery or something which had saved so I think she gave that away, and obviously, they let me go. But it's, like I say, when you're a kid, you don't really, you don't really... you know your experience of something not as much as when it's done, and you think:

ah, that's what could have happened. I suppose it's just the mental way of... you just mentally block things out to cope with it. But then, when, you know, when you're free, that's what you're like. Like, when you are about to have an accident or something, you get scared a day later about what could have happened.

(8:38) So it's, yeah. What else? So you look out of the window and you see houses on fire in the distance, for example. The food: food was quite a tough one because if you are in a sieged city, the first thing that would happen is that the food would run out. So we would - because the adults were not allowed to go out - we as kids, me and my brother, would have to go, I think I went with my gran once, would have certain relatives around the town and basically try and get, because there were farms around there, try and get food from there because - if you think of it - if a soldier saw an old woman and a kid they probably wouldn't shoot. If they saw two adults then the chances are that they would do something. So it was a bit of a risk, obviously, but if you want to survive you have to think of ways around it and we went there a few times.

And because it was winter, obviously you have to go and get wood if you want to stay warm because in a war zone there was no electricity. So there was instances where the... outside the flat there were a few houses and the Serb soldiers would burn the houses - I think the people may have escaped - we don't fully know what happened to them but, as they would burn it and go and do another house, another house. So we were going to sneak in almost as the house was burning and steal wood because the house was burnt already. You could still see smoke and still see flames. But, you know, now that I think about it's quite a big risk, to be honest with you. But I think it's a way to survive and I think you adapt to it.

So as a twelve year old kid you experience a few things but then, obviously, when it's all over you move on. And like I say, I do consider myself to be quite

lucky because we didn't lose anyone close to the family and there were lots of people who did. So all these hard times, I suppose, you kinda forget them and you move on. Because it could have been worse, as people say.

From the sieged town there was... I think it's called ethnic cleansing, where the Government, the Serb forces, would say 'You have 24 hours to leave the whole city.' They have to kick everyone out of the country. I keep coming back to this but it's a bit like what happened to the Jewish people in World War Two where you kinda take a country and you say, 'I just want to empty it.'

This happened in the 20th century. Which is a little bit weird because, you know, it's the age of the internet, it's the age of computers and you still have people with the mentality of emptying a whole country, which doesn't make sense because you would think we've moved on from that kind of age, that kind of mentality. But I guess it's different for some people.

So we had 24 hours to leave. They would load us on trains to take us out of the country. We were took to Macedonia, which is a neighbouring country: a train full of people. They would stop about ten miles from the border, I think, and then everyone would walk to the border. And then, from there, sometimes it would happen that they would stop the train, come in, take x amount of people of interest. They may say, "OK, we're gonna take these men." And they would just take them and let the others go. Most of them haven't been found. So you can imagine; they would probably arrest them, kill them. There's still close to 2,000 people missing from the war which no one knows about where they are.

Even though the people were escaping out of the country, I think it's, yeah, no one would understand what was going through their heads, what the plan was anyway, but it happened. So we went to Macedonia, to refugee camps. And then each country had to take x amount of people. So we were

picked randomly from the British government to fly us to the UK. And that's what happened. We got a letter saying that you're going to get picked up on Monday to go to the UK.

It must have been a few weeks. It wasn't long.

I think I would describe it as: you had the big refugee camp and next, close by, you had towns and cities. And you had families who took people, took people in their houses: we were one of them. So we were taken by a family, from the camp because it was overloaded: too many people. And then, from the camp itself, I can't describe it because we were taken from the camp: it's like moving into someone's house - but obviously with very limited space. But you're still quite lucky to be there as you're still alive. And then - within a few days - we got the call that we were going to be rescued and go to the UK, which was a bit of a surprise. (laughs)

We were picked up on a plane. I think there were about three hundred of us. They took us to Cumbria first. Ulverston. A town called Ulverston, which was quite a small town, erm, a quiet town, and then - all of a sudden - you have three hundred refugees. So it's a bit of a shock! But it was very... I think we were received very well. I suppose that it's thanks to the British Government that we are here now... we do what we do.

(15:28) When they took us, they had prepared what used to be an old school. It was turned into a refugee centre, so we stayed there for five or six months. So we had, each family had a room and then we had a big canteen where you could go and eat. You had sports facilities. And they would teach us English, and then I think my dad was one of the first people to say, 'We want to send our kids to a school, a real school'. Because, obviously, they would teach us English there but it's best if we mix up with normal twelve year olds, thirteen year olds. So they took us to...I went straight to year nine. I couldn't speak a word of English (laughs).

I failed it (laughs). I failed year nine because I didn't understand what was going on. Then we had a special language teacher, I think it was called, not special needs, special, something special. So it was a support teacher - Wendy, I think her name was - and we would go instead of going to say Biology, we would go to a special English lesson. And we picked it up quite quick. Obviously, it's a tiny bit difficult at first. So year nine, I failed; year ten, I could read and write, and by year eleven, I got an A* for English Lit.... I don't know how.

(17:20) I think that obviously in the beginning, you have to introduce yourself and they understood that we couldn't really understand English so they would... it was the perfect place to be, to be honest, the perfect reception. We didn't have any issues. You just move on; go to school; make friends, you know. So it's quite welcoming. And even though there was quite a lot of us - must have been like twenty students, new students, which couldn't speak English - and, at first you begin to stay with your own group 'cause you can speak that language. But then obviously, as the lessons begin, you are all different ages so you have to go in a separate class. And that's the best way to learn it.

We moved to Barrow-in-Furness, I think it's called, a city, a town, into our houses and just carry on, carry on from there. So I went to school. I finished secondary school in Barrow: finished college there as well. And then was looking for looking for universities and Manchester seemed the place to be for universities, yeah.

(18:33) I think, whilst I was at college, I think, I wanted to do something with media, something with film, multimedia: anything to do with cameras. And then I found out a certain college - it was called the Manchester College back then - which did a university degree. So we - me and my twin brother - went there. We moved to Manchester and went there for two years, studying Multimedia, I think it was called:

Multimedia. And then from there we kinda figured out what we wanted to do. You have those three years to experiment with different mediums so we one week you'd design a poster and next week make a website. So you test yourself on what you like doing.

(19:39) And then I enjoyed things to do with film making. I concentrated on my last year, concentrated on that. And Manchester - I didn't know much about Manchester when I moved here; I think the only thing I knew was that Manchester United was based here (laughs) - and except that, I didn't know anything about the city, or my way around, or anything like that. But I think that, within the first few days you know your way around, and you realise it's got everything, well most things you'd find in London...except you can walk it, (laughs) which is a bit of a bonus! Yeah, it was good, was great.

I think, if I had to choose again, I probably would pick Manchester again in terms of studying and living my life. It just seems to have... kinda everything is here, everything you need. Creative, it's quite a creative city. There's a lot of creatives here. There's a lot of famous people who, who started off in Manchester. It's got a good mood. It's got a good vibe.

(21:00) I think home is a difficult one, because, (laughs) because you spend thirteen years and you have childhood memories in one place. But that's the old home: that's where you grew up; it always has a place, you know, in yourself. And then you have the life now, which is Manchester, which is where your friends and family are and where your work is. I would say it's a bit of both but I would favour towards Manchester.

So it's nostalgic home is back before the war, kind of in your head, in your memory. Kosovo would be my home for my childhood and my

oldest memories. But for now and heading for the future I would consider Manchester home because it is where I grew up and got my start in life when it comes to careers and friendships and everything. So now, for the past 6 or 7 years I have been working as a film and commercials editor which is, kinda, what I wanted to do and I'm based Manchester, slowly getting an office here and basing myself in the city centre 'cause it's probably the perfect place to be when it comes to what I do and my career: the whole market.

And I kinda see myself being based here for, you know, hopefully for the future and just expand more. It's like I say, it's, the city centre itself, it offers everything that you'd want. So you've got galleries, you've got stadiums, concerts: you can do all those things which you can do in a big city. And the whole mood, you've got the Northern Quarter which is quite close: different areas, different moods. And when it comes to creatives, and you've got Media City now, which is perfect for my industry and, hopefully, my future.

I would be happy to do projects where we mix it, where we mix it up. So I would think about coming up with a documentary or a film where we would film in Kosovo as well as in Manchester so we tell two stories at the same time, 'cause I think it would be quite an interesting one.