

ORAL HISTORY INDEX AND SUMMARY

Interview with: Bleta Kabashi

Date: 18/9/14

Location: Manchester

Total duration: 1 hour 14 minutes and 35 seconds

Interview and summary by: Naomi Hamill

The interview plays as one long recording but is made of 3 tracks of varying lengths.

1.	Start time	Finish time	Approximate duration	Brief description
	00.00	1:14:35	1:14:35	Bleta describes her experiences in Kosovo before the war and at the start of the war. Bleta describes NATO bombing, the refugee camp and becoming involved in the charity, Manchester Aid to Kosovo. She moves to England and describes her marriage, her life working in a bronze foundry, and feelings about Kosovo.
<p>Pen sketch</p> <p>Summary of interview content</p>	<p><i>The daughter of two teachers, Bleta was born in Prizren, a town in the south of Kosovo. She was brought up in a village which was ethnically mixed, with Serbian and Albanian families living side by side. When Bleta was 13 her schooling was interrupted by the conflict. Her family moved away from their village and she then trained to be a pharmacist in secret in the parallel education system. Bleta's family were forced to move from house to house to escape from the Serb military. She missed out on enrolling to study pharmacy at University and so she enrolled to study Biology. Bleta's university studies were interrupted by the NATO bombings when her family were forced to flee to the refugee camps in Macedonia, sharing the camp with Bosnian refugees. After the conflict, Bleta became an English teacher and she eventually became a translator for MaK, where she met her husband Mike Annit, an artist from England. They work alongside each other at Castle Fine Arts Foundry in Oswestry, have a baby boy, Alberti, and return to Kosovo to visit Bleta's family each year.</i></p> <p>00.00 Bleta tells us that she is on maternity leave but that she currently works in a foundry. Bleta describes where she comes from, in Kosovo, and tells us that both her parents are teachers.</p> <p>01.18 Bleta describes her childhood. She talks about the mix of Serbians and Albanians in her village and the mix of ethnicities in her school. She talks about her school closing because the Albanians wouldn't learn in Serbian. She talks about travelling to school and says that she then had to study in a house, where she studied pharmacy. She says that some people left Kosovo because they didn't like</p>			

what was happening in Kosovo. She talks about the fact that they couldn't make the house look like a school. They had to hide the fact that they were studying. She says that a friend of hers had her education ruined because the police destroyed all her certificates. She says that this education system lasted for four years. Bleta describes how they studied on the floor and they couldn't have tables and chairs. She says that she needed work experience but that it was difficult to find and that they had to hide their work experience from the soldiers/police. She says that there are no documents or evidence of the fact that she did her work experience.

Bleta talks about the way in which the war started. She says, 'People were just disappearing; people were out of their jobs.' She talks about people volunteering and not being paid. She describes a demonstration about education. She says that that's when the Serbians and Albanians became enemies.

07.38 She talks about the fact that they wanted a prom night and the fact that they organised a secret prom night. She says, 'We wanted to do it. We wanted a prom night to finish secondary school. We wanted to dress up and look nice and have that experience.'

She says that she wanted to finish her education and to go to university but that it was difficult to travel in order to enrol because the police would stop you. She describes a ceasefire day and a journey she took to Prishtina to enrol in the university. She says that she was too late to enrol for pharmacy but that she accepted a place, offered, to study Biology. She says that her family moved to Prishtina and she began to study there but then the NATO bombing began. She says that her family planned to move to Macedonia and they ended up in a Macedonian refugee camp which was for Bosnian refugees and they shared a camp with Bosnians.

14.18 She describes life in the refugee camp. She says that they had very little in terms of possessions because they had had to move so many times within Kosovo.

She describes moving around to different places in Kosovo, 'We didn't have any clothes. We didn't have anything with us. We just left the house with a bag,' and says, 'Everywhere we went the house got burned.' She describes the constant moving, 'We were moving from house to house. From village to village. And, then we moved. As the Serbians were moving around, that's what we were doing as well. They were following us, somehow.' She describes the journey around Kosovo trying to get away from the Serbian police and to the camp and. She says that they were living close to the police and describes having to shelter in the roof each night to avoid bullets.

16.37 She says that her Dad split up the family so that at least half the family would survive. She was with her Mother and her two brothers but they were split from her Dad and the other brother.

17.54 Bleta describes what it was like to live in a flat whilst NATO were bombing. She says that she tried to find ways to give her hope. She talks again about them packing up as a family to go to Macedonia. She says that her Dad sent a letter to tell them to meet him at the train station and that the police were guarding the train doors.

18.44 She says that the police were going onto the train to find young people and to take them away. She describes a cousin who had breast cancer and how she couldn't find treatment. She describes the refugee camp at the Macedonian border. She says that people didn't realise how long they would be there. She says that people were ill and dying and that it was chaos. She says that some people were taken to Albania. She says that her family were taken to Macedonia.

22.31 She describes a scene where her Dad was nearly left behind at the border crossing.

24.00 Bleta describes the conditions in the camp. She says that they were looked after. She describes being played with and having food cooked for them. She describes some children without parents staying with them and says that their mother came to collect them and how she didn't recognise her own son because he had lost so much weight.

27.48 She says that people started going back to Kosovo in June. She says that her family stayed in the camp for a while as her family house had been burned and they didn't know if they would have food there. She describes living in a tent in her family's garden and then living in someone else's flat in one bedroom but that it was better than a tent. She says that they stayed there for a year until an organisation helped them with getting building materials.

29.30 She says that she went back to studying and decided to study English at the advice of her father. She says that she got a job teaching English in the school. She describes the conditions in the school. She describes the desire that children had to be back in school. Bleta says that she was studying and teaching English at the same time. She says that she was learning alongside her students really. She says, of her teaching, 'I was better than nothing!'

32.43 She describes her house being rebuilt. She says that they couldn't build the second floor because of war damage and that all their stuff was gone. She describes rebuilding her life at that time. She describes surviving each day at a time. She describes, 'Starting your life from zero.'

35.13 She says that as children/teenagers they didn't understand how difficult it was financially for her parents. She describes her Mum making flowers for a dressmaker

before the war to try to raise money as her job as a teacher was voluntary. She says that before the war they survived on the money from those flowers. She says that they looked forward to making the flowers because they would eat better food if they did. She says that her brother asked a neighbour to buy flowers because he was bored of eating pasta and wanted to eat meat. She says that after the war it was still like normal life but that each evening there would be an announcement on the news about how many people had been killed and they were hearing stories from each other.

38.12 Bleta describes a lady who was concerned about leaving her gold and thought the Serbians would take it. She dug a hole in the garden and buried it. Bleta says that the woman was more concerned about her gold than her sons. She says that her own parents would sell their gold so that they had enough food and clothes before the war. She says, 'My Mum would sell a ring to bring some money in the house...she sold all her gold, slowly.' and adds, 'They would sell all their gold to bring us food.'

40.10 Bleta says that some people put all their valuable things in the basement and would cement it up and then after the war they were able to recover things like photos, TVs, sofas, jewellery and gold. She says that most women would take their jewellery with them and the police would stop them and would cut their clothes and take it away from them.

42.30 She says that life went back to normal. She and her brother were working and so they had enough but that there were families who were 'really, really struggling.' She says that there were lots of building jobs but there wasn't money to pay for it so lots of it was done by volunteers. She says that they were building schools and trying to get their government back.

43.33 She describes being a translator at the first elections, even though she couldn't speak English properly. She describes working with someone who would speak loudly to her to try to make her understand her English! She says that people were so happy about the elections and that everyone came out to vote.

48.09 Bleta describes how she became involved in Manchester Aid to Kosovo. She says that she had a one week holiday in March and she visited her family in Podujeva. She says that she dreamed all night about flying and going to England and then she woke in the morning and her cousin told her that there were English people in Podujeva and asked her to go and show the people around. Her cousin was driving the van and she did a bit of translating and they would help her with her English. She says it helped her to learn English and she spent a week with them. She says that they did lots of things to try to get land for the Peace Park that MaK were trying to build.

51.11 She says that this week was the best time of her life. She says that they came back in October and called her and needed her help. She says she went and helped

again for another two weeks and every time they came back she helped them.

52.17 Bleta describes how her husband Mike first came to Kosovo. She says that she thought another artist was his girlfriend. She says she didn't think that she would be with him. She says that it's not a common thing that a Kosovan girl would marry an English man. That's not something that would happen. She says that she was supposed to marry someone Albanian, from the same religion. She says that Mike was always looking at her and he made her a flower out of nails and invited her for dinner.

She says that Mike asked, 'Have you got a boyfriend?' and that she said, " 'No, nobody loves me.' I kind of did the lip as well, like I'm going to start crying because nobody loves me.' And he said, 'Well, I like you'."

54.30 She says that he told her that he liked her and he would visit all the time and say he had meetings but that he never had meetings and just came to visit her. She says that they started seeing each other and she had a new job in Pristina and also that they started planning for the future. She says that they felt that living in England would be better than Kosovo.

Bleta describes her first visit to England. She says that it was sunny and she stayed for a month. She applied for a work visa and started working and living in England.

56.30 Bleta describes her first 5 months in England. She says that she found it difficult to see people in England who had more than people in Kosovo but were ungrateful.

58.33 Bleta says that she and her husband both work at the foundry and they have a baby boy, Albert, and have a happy life. She describes how she did not tell her family at first about her relationship with an English man. Bleta describes how she knew her eldest brother would be supportive and how her mother would worry, especially about what her father would say. When she booked a plane ticket to fly to England to visit Mike, she told her family that she was visiting Pam, from the charity Manchester Aid to Kosovo, to do some work with the charity. It was only when she got on the plane that she told her mother that she was actually going to England to stay with Mike and potentially marry him and live in England. Bleta describes how her mother was upset and cried but surprisingly her father was fine with it once he realised Mike was a nice, single young man and would be good for her. She describes her guilt about not telling her parents and family before she came to England as she didn't realise they would react in a supportive way and assumed they would disapprove and make it difficult for her.

1.01.18 If she could do it all again, she would tell them first, knowing they would not try to prevent her marriage to an English man.

Bleta describes that it is unusual for Kosovar women to marry English men. She says there is still an element of 'Oh, right, you're the one who married an English man,' for her. She describes how she has always been different. Bleta says that people, who know her, in Kosovo, agree that she has somehow been made differently and was not made for a Kosovar man and it makes sense for her to be with an English man.

Bleta describes her feelings about living in Manchester, England. She describes the rain and wet weather, with a chuckle.

Bleta says 'I feel safe here. I feel looked after. I feel, I dunno, it's not that I don't feel safe, well, I, Kosovo is where family is, where friends are, where memories are, where my childhood is. Kosovo is my place.'

Bleta describes how if she had the things she has in England in Kosovo, she would go back in a heartbeat. Home, for her, is now England as that is where she has her husband, son, house, job, colleagues and neighbours who know and welcome her. She now feels a guest in Kosovo and at home in England. Bleta describes how it was difficult to make new friends at first. She says that she and Mike got married.

Bleta says that she was bored but she would visit Mike who worked in a foundry. She says that when she was there they asked her to do some work experience and she got some work as a foundry technician. She says that her husband Mike casts his sculptures there and she started making small sculptures as well.

Bleta describes how her husband, Mike, would always bring her a rose when he visited her in Kosovo which she had to hide from her brothers and would keep, privately, as dried flowers, which she still has to this day. She says that Mike then cast her a bronze rose which he gave to her but then he stopped bringing her real flowers as the bronze rose was to last forever. Bleta says that she still wanted real flowers so, in the garden where they live, he planted a rose garden which he says she can have year after year.

1.08.10 Bleta describes the jealousy she felt when first hearing about the lives of English people with all their hobbies, leisure activities and travel. She says how this does not fully go away and she sometimes feels that way when she compares her life with those of her English friends and colleagues. Bleta describes how English people were interested to hear her life story, as well. She describes her anger and frustration when some English people do not appreciate what they have and are often dissatisfied, when she is just happy to have anything at all. As an example, she says she is happy to have any book or any table rather than worry about the type or the standard not being exactly as they would prefer it. She describes initially being emotional when people were picky about things but finds she is now becoming like that herself the longer she lives in England.

Bleta says that she is trying to live the 'the easy life' in comparison so how things were for her before.

1.10.39 Bleta recalls receiving a gift from Pam Dawes, during her first visit to Kosovo, of a large scarf. Bleta, not being a 'scarf person' was eager to show her appreciation and turned it into a dress. She was worried that if she was not seen wearing it, Pam might think that she did not like the gift when really she just did not wear scarves. Bleta describes how she did, however, need a dress and so she created one from the large amount of fabric she had just been given. Pam was impressed by this ingenuity and complimented Bleta on being a designer. Bleta describes how she told Pam that 'No, life has forced me to be resourceful.' She has, through necessity, become a designer, a builder, a hairdresser, all these things, because she did not have money to pay other people to do these things. Bleta describes how she does not consider herself to have had talent, at that time, she just had needs which needed satisfying. Bleta comments that in England, girls do not have to do this, if they do it, it is out of choice not necessity.

Bleta describes how it was emotional comparing the lives of people in England in comparison to those of herself and her friends in Kosovo. She says it is an easy life in England and describes how if someone is to have a problem in England, someone else will come and fix it for you. She uses pavements and roads as an example of this. Bleta describes that these will always get fixed in England but in Kosovo, when she lived there, there would have been potholes. Bleta describes how in recent times, this has changed though, and in Kosovo they have been buildings road and buildings and she considers it to be more beautiful now.

Bleta considers that in five years time, Kosovo may even look better than some places in England as everything is new in comparison to English things which may have been around for hundreds of years. Bleta comments on how the fibre-optic broadband in Kosovo is better than the slow internet at her English home. Bleta then jokes that she is 'being all British and complaining' and goes on to say how she 'might have a cup of tea and a biscuit, now.' In the background her husband, Mike, can be heard replying, 'brew?'. They joke about this some more and both laugh.