

Interview with Lumnije Mustafa and Naomi Hamill (32.33)

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(00.00)

NH: This is Naomi Hamill recording Manchester Aid to Kosovo Oral Histories Project with Lumnije.

LM: Luminije Mustafa.

LM: So I was born in Prishtina in Kosovo on 19th of the Eighth, 1989. Came here in Manchester through the war in Kosovo in 1999, 16 years ago now, I think, yeah. So when I came here, I was 9 years old.

I remember going to school, I think I remember from being 6 onwards, more than anything, to be honest. So going to school, I think I was in year 3, when everything started happening, I just remember being very close with my friends and just doing children activities and learning and spending time with the family and helping out my mum. I was the eldest. Well, I am the eldest in my family, yeah.

If I'm honest, I wasn't aware of everything until it all happened to the point where I was aware just how serious it was. Until the Serbian military came into our school and then our teachers asked us to leave school and just go back to our houses. Our school was in the middle of two villages, both, so two villages, the children from both two villages would attend the same school so it was quite a big school. Up 'til that day, we would hear it on the news and everything but I don't think I ever stopped to think about where it was happening and what's happening and, if I'm honest, my parents didn't allow us to sit there when the news was on. They would tell us to go outside and

play or read a book, just, we were never in the room when they were listening to the news.

(2:04) So until the last two weeks where it started, I think when it really hit, me myself, is when we were in school during a lesson and I think, it was like, daytime, and our teacher asked us to hold hands with one another, go in pairs of two, and just go home and he tried to pair us up where we lived close, like if we lived close to one another. So yeah, at that point we could see the tanks outside the school from the window and at first all our doors were shut because we didn't want anybody to come in and then we were told that it's ok to go out of the classroom and walk outside, yeah.

From what I remember, most clearly, is that day. I remember going back home and we were told so just pack our things, get in the car and just drive to the next village. Kind of were thinking about surviving hour by hour, not about the future and where you would go, so, I remember all of us, that day, just going to a different village, close by. But then it was ok because the tanks had moved on and we thought the Serbs had moved from our village and then we ended up going back to our village again. And then, yeah, because in Kosovo the rural areas, the houses are not too close together. So myself and my family and our uncle with his two week old baby, we all lived in the same house and - thinking back now - I'd always remember my mum and my auntie always having food ready, and just like dough, that was made ready so you can just cook it, just in case anything happened, you would just grab it with you. And then our neighbours as well.

After that day, when we came back, we'd gone, we'd come back to the house, to our house because we thought it was ok to do so. And then, after that day, the Serbs had come back into our village. And I just remember, because that was, before that day, it was kind of my last day at school so I just remember all of us - they were shooting - and I remember there was a

mosque that was near our village and they shot through the mosque so many times that you could see the mosque coming down: just kind of breaking and falling apart. And we were all told to kind of lay on the floor so we'd miss being hit. And then, do you know what? I don't even know how, me and my family - there were six of us - and my uncle, there was three of them, my granddad then was alive as well, all of us got in the same car, plus neighbours kids. And I just remember that day, walking (sighs), being in the car and turning my head around and my then high school best friend was in the car behind us and I just remember her waving at me. And that was the last time I saw her until I came here to England. I wasn't aware that she had come to Manchester as well.

Our journey kind of began from that day onwards, really, because then we started moving from one village to another. We lived like that for about three weeks. We'd go to another village which was probably twenty minutes away from my village and then they would invade that village and we would be told to move away from that village and go to another village.

I remember these images clearly about, moving on from one village to another and thinking, "Oh, we're going to have a better life here and it's safe." I guess that's the better word to use, 'it's safer' to move on from the village that we... I was living in. We'd only moved to a village that's twenty minutes away and then we'd hear gunshots nearby and then we'd be told, "Oh, we better move on to another village." Further away from our village. And we ended up going to my auntie's home, and we stayed there overnight and then in the morning we were woken up by a tank which was behind the house. And I was told - I didn't know then, but when we came to England I was told - that on that day, the men had gone and offered lots of whatever they had for the people that were in the tank, for the Serbs, not to come into the house.

And by the time they'd found - I don't know what they offered - money, or their savings, us lot were kind of sneaked out from the back and then me and... all our experience of the journey is with my own family, the six of us and my aunties, uncle and the two week old, and my granddad. And then we'd move to another village which was across, kind of on the east side which was a bit further away than what we were doing. And we stayed in that village for a week and it was a house which was abandoned already by its own owners: it looked like they'd left and crossed borders to Macedonia or to a safer, different country, really.

But I remember that when we had done that, we thought - because it went quiet for a few days - we thought that it was safe to go back home and to just grab the rest of our stuff and just see what the situation is like. And you'd hear from like, people it's more like, hearsay, "Oh, it's ok now, you can come back, it's ok, it's going to be ok!"

So we did, my dad made the decision to go back. We did end up going back to my village and it was probably the first night ever that we decided to remove our shoes and sleep without our shoes. And it was during the night that one of our neighbours had said that there was a pool of water nearby - like a small lake, shall I say - and they'd heard... they'd seen the Serbs throwing bodies in the lakes. That night everybody was like, they'd knocked onto everybody's doors to say, "They're coming here, they're throwing bodies in the lakes!" So that was the only night that my mum and dad decided for us to like, to just take our shoes off and obviously there was a house, we were living in a house where there was another family there. So we woke up, I didn't have my shoes on. I just remember it was raining that night and just walking in the mud and just moving to 20 houses upwards, just further away from the lake. Yeah, me and my sister, both of us, because my mum and dad had my younger brothers on their hands and knees, we had to just run away in the mud and go to another house which we then slept there 'til morning.

And in fact, they did throw bodies, they just threw bodies then drove off, it's not like they were coming into the village but we didn't know that then. It's better to be safe than sorry.

And then from that village, my dad made the decision not to go back and to go to another village which was close by. Even in that village, I just remember, I remember quite clearly how in the middle of the night, because the men would take it in turns to stay awake during the night so not everybody is sleeping at the same time. I just remember walking up. We'd sleep on the floor and everything, because you just go into people's houses and they don't have enough room for you. You'd be grateful to just have a place to sleep anywhere; you wouldn't really pick and choose. I just remember waking up because it was so dark, I couldn't feel my mum close to me and I couldn't - my mum was always close and if we were asleep, she'd come with us - so I thought that they'd left me (laughs). I thought that they'd forgot. I think that that was kind of a fear that was kind of bestowed on us, because you'd hear it on the news. Me and my sister were very naughty, every time, when my dad, you know when you tell somebody you can't do that, you want to do it even more. We tried, my dad would say, "Oh, don't stay here" when - you know - they were listening to the news, we'd try, we'd sneak the door open a little bit and just hear anyway.

We'd heard that a few families had forgotten their children because they were in such shock running away and I think that was my fear, that I'd be forgotten. I just remember them saying that, you know, her family had forgotten her, their own child. And I think I was always worried that that was going to happen. So I remember waking up in the middle of that night and literally crying coming out of the room and I could see my dad. First, I saw strangers, we don't even realise and asking, "Where is my mum?" and then my dad came he said, "She's inside the room." And I was like, "She's not inside the room!" And I was crying and then my mum, woke up, bless, she was

sleeping next to me and I didn't see her in the dark, so yeah, and that happened twice.

When the NATO... we did this a few times, I would say we moved to about eight villages, every three to four days. And we went back to our own village twice and the second time we went back, it was quite late on and I just remember my neighbour. My neighbour's house was facing ours and again the news was on and my dad had told us to go outside and play, play on the balcony. I just remember playing with my sister on the balcony and I could see my neighbour running from his house with his hands held high and shouting. And at this point, I wasn't aware that NATO were sent over to save us. I didn't know any of that but all I could see was him shouting with his hands up. And I thought, what came to me, was that his house: the Serbs had killed everybody in his house. I thought he was shouting and running to us warning us, to warn us. So I froze. I literally froze and nobody could move me, I think they had to carry me. So yeah, he was shouting and crying in excitement, "It's ok, it's going to be ok - we're going to survive!" And I remember not being, I remember very clearly, like freezing and my sister and my mum coming out because then my sister starts shouting. Even the neighbour, I think he realised what - he didn't mean to - but he realised what had happened and I didn't speak 'til the next day. I lost my speech. I remember trying to speak, I remember that very clearly, but nothing would come out of my mouth.

So yeah, that happened to me twice, the second time was when we were trying to cross the border from one village to go to Macedonia and to do that we had to get on a train. On that train there would be thousands of people trying to get on that train and the Serbs would decide whenever they wanted to allow you to cross the border or send you back by the time you got to Skopje. I think it was an hour and a half train ride, I'm not exactly sure - probably felt longer than that, probably wasn't as long. I remember we went

on that train twice, and (sighs) well, the second time - the first time they turned us back and we'd heard that they can turn you back and just turn back and don't make, don't make a big deal out of it - and second time we went, the people that were on the train, they'd probably tried to cross the borders numerous times - more than what we did - and I just remember the second time.

We all decided to get out of the train anyway even though we weren't allowed to - not just us but the whole Albanian - the whole Kosovan people on that train. I just remember the Serbs shooting up, not shooting at us, but shooting up to say, "Get in, or we'll be shooting at you!" And at this point, I think, at this point because of the way he was aiming, he was holding a gun at me, so I think I must have thought that I was going to be shot at so I froze again (laughs), like a child freezes. I remember my mum telling me to run, run to her and I couldn't move. I had to literally be carried away from that.

Unfortunately on that train, the second time, my mum had fainted on the train and there weren't many people... well there wasn't anyone there that knew what to do and how to help her. She was kind of collapsed on the floor, out of everything, considering what we went through, that was really quite scary for me. People kept throwing water at her to wake her up and kind of slapping her around the face to wake her up.

(16:07) So we'd gone back to Kosovo again to the same village. My dad had given up: we were not getting back on the train after we'd had that situation with mum. And the fact that I was held at gun point - whether that was intentional or not - it still happened and I was pushed by one of the Serbs as well and fell into one of the bags that we had. He just kind of pushed me with his elbow and, obviously, I was a nine year old child, so I think I fell. And I remember my dad being very cross about that and my mum had to pull him away, thankfully. So I don't think any of us wanted to do that again, get on

the train, but my granddad, the next morning, was like, "Please let's try once more time, third time, let's just do it. We've got nowhere else to go. We don't know what the situation is going to be like!" So we decided to get on that train again, the next morning, or two days onwards, I think, actually, because it wasn't leaving the next day. That day there was more people than what there was the previous two times that we'd got on. There wasn't a queue anymore. It was like a place full of people outside that couldn't get through the door and my dad put all of us through the window.

(17:27) And at this point, everybody was pushing. It's, when you think back it's more like: *save yourself!* And I remember my dad pushing my mum through the window and the train had started to go off. My mum was hanging in between the window. She still had that coat, you know, she had a coat which was ripped because she was still hung in between. I said to her a couple of months back ago, "Why did you get rid of it? You should have kept it as a..." Anyway, my dad... my mum came through. All of us were screaming and crying because we could see what was going on. And my dad was still not on the train and, I think, he was pushed on by people who could see what was happening: that his whole family were on the train and he wasn't there.

This time around, we were allowed to cross the borders and we went into a camp area in Macedonia and we stayed there for two weeks. I remember going to school there and I remember thinking how pointless is this (laughs). I went to school there for two weeks and the next thing I know is my dad came and pulled us out of the lesson in the camps saying, "We have to go now, they're calling our names." I think there was a system where you put your name forward and you say where you want to go and I just - I had no idea where we were going - we were just put on the plane and next thing I remember is waking up.

(19:04) I think I slept through the plane journey because I just remember being woken up and what I know was night time because the light, it was very dark on the plane. And I just remember coming down the stairs and it's a bit of a blur, the bit at the airport, but, I just remember the journey to the Blakeley flats. I remember going up and then, just the journey that begun after that.

(19:39) Where I lived, and the area that I lived in and our day to day activities for my parents - because it was a rural area and they grew crops and they sell, you know, that's what they did and that was part of our life - I didn't really think of anything else. I would, I think, because I was just coming to year... I was in year 3 and we started to learn a little, learn the numbers, I could count up to 10 and say, "hello". I didn't know what to expect when I came to England, I had no idea. Sometimes it feels... it felt a bit unreal. It, I wasn't there. It doesn't make sense, I'm not describing it very well, but it didn't feel real up 'til, when people came up to you and spoke to you in English and I had no idea what they were saying (laughs). But you start, I don't know, just... I think we were quite lucky because there was a lot of Kosovan people in the same position and lived in the same flat¹ and you could speak to them in English.

We had lots of support from translators and we had lots of, I don't know what you'd call them now. I don't know if they were social workers but lots of support from them as well. And then, just the neighbours that would come and - kind of I don't know - you were taken away from the experience you just had two weeks ago, or a week ago, and not made to forget about it, but kind of like, it was really nice because you didn't have to think about it and you weren't there anymore.

But, in saying that, I remember because we came in May and then it was summer, it was summer and it was the school holidays. But I just remember

¹ A thirteen floor high rise block of flats in north Manchester

when it was bonfire night; I remember how scared I was because I didn't know of bonfire night. And obviously bonfire night is bonfire night. (laughs) And I remember waking up at midnight, I think it was, before that and crying; holding my mum and saying, "Ooh, what's happening? Is it happening again?" and her reassuring me that it's going to be ok and it's nothing like what it was. It's just a celebration. So yeah, there was always something that would bring you back, or take you back to what you'd just experienced. But in saying all that, I actually feel quite lucky because, in everything that we experienced, we were very fortunate that nobody in my family got killed and nobody got murdered and all the horrible things, that people were saying were happening, didn't happen to us.

(22:20) And I just remember how nice everybody was when we came to England and how everybody was so giving, so welcoming and it was really nice because we kind of forgot why we came. Well, we did as children.

I know my mum would always put on the news because she had no idea where her family were: there were no cell phones, we'd be poor - they lived in the villages at that time. And it's funny because whenever you ask my parents or anybody what they remember about here, they just remember the people and how appreciative we were of everything.

And you know what? We still visit that area sometimes, just because we just remember everything and I think that we never had a chance to say thank you, neither - you know, later on. So yeah, I think, after we came here, we had a year to decide. After a year we were asked whether you want to go back to Kosovo. I think if you wanted some money and restart your life there or whether you just want to kind of postpone it for another year and see how life is here. And funnily enough, my granddad didn't want to go back to Kosovo. He had no friends here; he didn't have many people his age here, compared to us children. My parents, my dad wanted to go back. He was very sad here because I think he missed - his mum had passed away in

Kosovo - I think he just wanted to be close, and to stay over there. But my granddad begged him; my granddad begged him to stay for another year and just give it another chance here. And he just kept... I remember him saying, "Everybody's so nice and so helpful. Nothing is going to happen for another year." And that was kind of our beginning, really, because we never ended up going back.

(24:28) We started going to school, we'd learn the language, we always had lots of support in school. We'd always... I think we had an hour or two to just learn basic English. And I think from the day when my mum collapsed on the train, I always knew. I think I was always so angry at that day because there was nobody that knew what to do. And I think from that - it sounds really clichéd - but I think from that day onwards, I always wanted to be in an environment where I can help people: to hold somebody's hand if that's the least that I can do to actually make a difference to them.

So I think I'd begun my journey, my career. I wanted to become... I knew I wanted to work in medicine and either become a doctor or be in that field, in that speciality. Unfortunately, I think my grades - from what I remember - my high school grades weren't as good for me to go into medicine straight from school to college so I decided to go into nursing, and no regrets.

(25:50) I went from... I went to college. I did really well, actually, thinking back - I think I'm quite harsh on myself - went to University, Manchester Metropolitan University, and studied Adult Nursing: did my degree in that. Whilst I was doing my placement, I realised that I loved working in Intensive Care so I qualified in 2010 and I worked in Critical Care for 4 years. And I always remember why I've gone into it. And it's that feeling - I can't really describe it - just I love being there for people and helping them out. Even if there is an end to that and you can't really change fate, change reality, I just remember being sat there with somebody and it's probably the last breath

that they take and just holding their hand, if that's the least I can do. But yeah, I think that always this feeling it's always extended from my experience back in Kosovo, and especially that day, from what I can remember.

When we went back to Kosovo, for the first time ever, you could just see how broken people were that actually experienced things like that and it's really sad because to this day you still have women that were raped and haven't confronted that, in a way. Erm, so I always feel really lucky in saying, in telling people whenever I meet somebody. Because of my name they ask me where I'm, you know, where it's come from. And they always assume that actually I was born here and my family decided to name me this name. So when I talk about it - and you can't really tell people that, you can't hide it and say, when... I always tell them when I came. And they always go, "Oh was it during that war?" I think: *Oh yes it was*. But then I kind of feel like, I shouldn't be saying that because nothing happened to me and nothing happened to my family compared to some of my friends or some of the people that I know of. And that was 'war' for them. For us, we were quite lucky and we got, got lucky, I guess and survived it and didn't see the horrible things that people saw. But I can see how it's affected me as well, because the first time I went to Kosovo, I remember going to the garden and I could hear all the noises: the bombs and the gunshots and everything.

(28:52) Last year, when I went to Kosovo, I think there was a wedding and they were celebrating and it was midnight. I don't know whether it was, they were firing guns, because that what they do, as a celebration or it was something like that. Anyway, I woke up in the middle of the night crying for no apparent reason but I think I was just really upset. And I remember I walked into my mum and dad's bedroom and I was just crying and I couldn't stop myself. Sixteen years on, it still had an impact obviously. And although we haven't been through what a majority of people have been through, it still affected, I guess still affected me in some way or another.

A couple of years ago, it's really hard because - quite sad in what I'm going to say - but when, a lot of people, when they find out, for example, here I kind of feel like - especially a couple of years ago - I kind of have a life in Kosovo because my grandparents from my mum's side are there and my aunties, my uncles, my cousins: there's a lot of family that's over there. And when I go there on holiday, and I have to come back here, I think my heart breaks a little bit. And when I'm here: when I'm over there, I miss England and I'm ready to come back to England.

I kind of feel like I'm stuck in between: I can't, I can't pick, like, I can't. A lot of people say, "Oh you're going back home?" And I feel like, "Is it my home?"

I've lived now my whole life, I feel like more than half of my life, I've lived here and I will continue living here. It's quite hard because I've adjusted to life here. I love the weather. I prefer the rain than the hot, very hot summers over there and from that to everything else, really. The culture, my job, I've just got a new job² now, as well. I don't think I'll be able to do what I do here if I go back over there. Mentalities are different, I think, and there's a lot to be done in Kosovo at the moment. So it's quite hard really, because I love Manchester.

I think from what I can remember, from the age of 17, I have been to Kosovo once a year. My grandparents are very old and every time we go, bless 'em, they say, "Aw, I don't think you'll see us next year." So we tend to go every year and it's really nice to catch up with everybody and see everyone and not really forget them and it's good, yeah.

I think my experience of what I've been through, I think it has made me. I think more. When I hear things about the war on the news, I don't know, I tend to -

² organ transplant specialist nurse

I don't know if that's just part of myself or it's what I've come to become from what I've been through - but I do feel like I'm more aware of things. I think of things more and how I act with people and I am so much more appreciative.

And I do tend to say to people, quite a lot - especially in my field of work - you know, "You don't know how lucky you are. You've got this NHS, free care. You don't know what people are going through to pay for what you're getting."