

Adonis Alaj interview with Pam Dawes (1:25:54)

10th January 2016

(00:00)

PD: So this is Pam Dawes recording Adonis Alaj for the Manchester Aid to Kosovo Oral History project, 'Voices of Kosovo in Manchester'.

So Adonis, could you say your name and perhaps your age and roughly where you live in the U.K.?

AA: Yeah, no problem. I'll try and put off my Manc accent before I say my name (laughs). So my name is pronounced Adonis Alaj. I'm 30 years old. I moved to the U.K. with my family May 11th, I think was the exact date 1999. I live in Timperley. We've lived in the Altrincham area, Timperley area, since we've got here.

PD: Adonis, could you tell us a little bit about life in Kosovo when you were a child before the war? It would be interesting to hear some of your memories of how it was and where you lived and what life was like.

AA: Yeah. So I lived in Prishtina, the capital. That's where my pre war memories were probably of happiness, really: just everyday as a kid just literally playing out every day, school. So from what I remember it wasn't the best of conditions but I suppose as a kid, back then, you had to make do with what you had. And I just remember everyone, not just me but everyone around me, being really happy. I remember we'd moved - not just myself, obviously with my family - we'd moved a couple of times in Prishtina but very close by. We've always lived in a particular... Sunny Hill is the area where we live. And we still live there to this day. But, yeah, before that I remember,

obviously, all my memories - if I think back now - as just playing out as a kid with all the kids of the area every day.

And it wasn't until, I would probably say, later on... '97/'98, is where, from my point of view as a kid... the trouble was always there in the background because it was always a case of if you saw a policeman, a Serbian policeman, or a police car or a police vehicle of any type - or even just a Serbian that you thought had some sort of control - then you were always almost cautious of what you were doing: even playing as a kid in the area. So we'd be playing football, for example, and I remember actually - to this day it sticks - there was a Serbian. He wasn't even a policeman. I don't know what he was. I really don't know what he was, to this day, but I remember he was quite a frightening man. He was a big man. He was a tall man: over six foot. And he had a... he always had a little dog with him and we'd always see the dog first before we saw him when we were out playing football with my friends or whatever it may be. And we'd always used to see him and we used to think, "Oh wow. Hold on guys, he's coming round." And we'd stop whatever we were doing and run off. All we were doing was playing football. And it was actually... that's another thing that sticks to memory... because he was the reason for one of the moves. When I said that, we'd move house because one of the days getting closer to '99 towards, sort of, the war, when the war really started kicking off, I remember by dad coming in one day and, sort of, saying, "We've got to move. We're going to go to our auntie's and live with our aunties." Who had lived a few blocks away from us.

And we were all like, "Well why would we do that? What happened?" like, nothing, you know, nothing's going on, sort of thing. "Why would we do that?"

This was before they started. Before the ethnic cleansing started. Before anything really kicked off in Prishtina.

And then he told us and it was basically that this man... we lived above him in the flats. So this is five storey flats and we'd lived, basically, above him. And he'd seen my dad walking up the stairs, down the stairs, wherever, somewhere. And for whatever reason, my dad never, obviously, none of us really - you know, there were some that would let on to him and try and be polite with him 'cause they knew what he was like, and this is, of course, an Albanian community. And he would... basically, he'd said something along the lines of to my dad, "If you don't leave your house," for whatever reason - to this day, we don't know what it was - but, "If you don't leave the house," you know, basically, "tonight I'll visit you," in a threatening sort of sense, "later on."

(05:00) Now this was when my little brother was just over one-years-old. And this, sort of, leads me to, I remember - even as a kid, for him - he used to be scared. We used to stop him from running around the flat because of making noise because he lived, literally, downstairs from us. And we knew he was dangerous because as a general thing, as a normal thing, you knew if you are Serbian nine times out of ten they'll be armed. Nine times out of ten they will have some sort of weapons. And that was always on the back of our minds. With him, we knew 100% because every time there'd be some sort of Serbian celebration whether that's even football game where Serbia, or Yugoslavia, as it was, was playing then - but it was a 100% Serbian team basically made of Serbian players - he'd celebrate in a sense by firing his AK47 out of the window of the flat. And obviously we lived just above it and the noise was deafening every time it happened. And it's the scariest thing that can happen because you'd think, "Wow!" when I was a child.

And anyway, going back to that... so obviously, he met my dad. He stopped my dad, said whatever he did to him: threatened him, basically. So we, of course, we left that night. And that's when we went to... we went to live at my auntie's flat. Not long after that is when the... I don't know how I can put

it... it's when the... when the cleansing really started. When we saw, literally, every... you'd look out the window and you'd would see is Serbian paramilitary troops. So you'd see either the police or you'd see someone going flat by flat, literally entering every single building. And these are old buildings. These are people... every single, well, obviously - looking out the balcony - I'd see, I'd known people from every single flat. I'd know people or I'd know their kids or I'd know, you know, I'd know their faces.

PD: Civilians?

AA: Yeah, civilians. Civilians that I'd known. Literally all you'd see is the people entering the building and literally within minutes people leaving. Bags full. Just leaving with whatever. Entering their cars and just driving off.

And that's when we started panicking. That's when we started thinking, "Oh my God, what's happening?" That's literally how it started. And that was not long after the bombing started: the N.A.T.O. bombing started¹.

PD: When the police and the military were in, were they going in armed?

AA: Yes. Yes, fully armed: all of them. I remember at the flat where we were, at my auntie's. There were quite a few of us there from my family, of course: my dad; my mum (both my parents); myself; my brother; my little brother; my sister; (so that's six of us); my auntie; her husband; their daughter and their son, living in a one bedroom flat for quite a few days. So that's ten of us living, literally, in a one bedroom flat for... I can't remember how long. Can't recall how long it was but it was quite a few days.

And when they came in, my uncle - so this is my auntie's husband - he was the eldest one there. And he was actually held up and I was last with him

¹ The air strikes lasted from March 24, 1999 to June 10, 1999 and led to the withdrawal of Yugoslavian forces from Kosovo and the establishment of UNMIK a U.N. mission in Kosovo.

leaving the flat as the Serbian troops, basically, were emptying, coming in and literally all they were shouting, knocking on the door and saying, "Leave! Get out now!" That's basically what they were saying and amongst other things - other threats basically. And as we were leaving my uncle, because he was quite old - obviously he was leaving - I had to help him as he was leaving. I think me being there is probably what saved his life. By that I mean as he was leaving, 'cause he was the last one out and he was obviously quite old and frail, and it was almost the look of disgust from the... from one Serbian, sort of... I don't know what he was... soldier or... towards him, in a sense of, "Why? What would you need him for?" In that sense. And I just sort of looked and as a kid I panicked. I didn't know what to do so I just sort of went to him and grabbed him by the shoulder and helped him and just walked off, basically, and just walked out of the building.

(9:35) That was the first time we attempted to leave Kosovo towards Macedonia.

So that's where we took, basically, to the road.

PD: How old were you?

AA: I was... I would have been 13. 13, just before... yeah, I would have been 13 at the time. That was probably about April, maybe, March/April time '99. And so that was, to be fair, quite late: there were already thousands of people that had left by this point. And most of it, you know - the cleansing - had already started. So we left. We went towards the border. We started driving towards the border. And there was our car and my... and even in the car, there was probably - it was an old Toyota - and there was about eight of us crammed in the car.

We attempted to start to leave, basically. So we drove through Prishtina first. And then my dad and my uncle decided it's too dangerous. We're not going to be able to because if they catch us, and it's just us, and they catch us somewhere, anywhere, on the road on our own, they're just going to put us to the side. They decided that it is too dangerous to do that. So we turned around and we went back.

What basically you heard every time - the stories that you'd hear - is that if you meet any paramilitary troops or any Serbian forces or anyone on the road... and it's... obviously, if they see you, they just put you to the side, line you up and basically kill us. Murder us on the side of the road. That's generally what always was in the back of your head with... that's the stories you'd hear every day, sort of leading to that time.

So we turned around. We went back to a house, which was one of the neighbour's: my uncle's neighbour's who was with us. He was in his car when we left. So obviously the whole building had been kicked out and he was with us as well. So there was three cars; we were in three cars. And he turned around and said, "I know such and such, in this building, in this house in Prishtina." Not far from our flats. So we went there and he was still there. He was quite an old man: a really nice old man. And he welcomed us in straight away and he said, "Yeah, come on in. Come on in. They've not been here" (as in the Serbian troops). "They've not kicked us out or anything. No-one's been in, nothing like that so just come in. Come on in."

He had a big... quite a big house and quite a few rooms. And we'd been there for a day: stayed there for one day. And the next day I just remember hearing a little bit of noise from the outside. And I went out. And there was these students, these Kosovar Albanian students (because, obviously, all the Universities were in Prishtina). So all the students really from everywhere else were living in Prishtina in accommodation and going to university, pretty

much. There was only really one, I think, university in Prishtina. They'd been chased by Serbian police so they were running and they came and they saw there was someone in there. And they knocked on and they said, "Please can we come in because we're being chased?"

Because, again, that was another thing: if you were a student and you would live somewhere else, you were seen as a KLA² soldier. You weren't seen as a, you know, a civilian or a student: you were seen as a threat (because you were a young man, a young student). So they were probably the worst: if they caught them, they'd have been dead, basically. That's how it was.

And so they knocked on and the old man - as he was - he said, "Yeah, come on in. Go upstairs and go to the loft. Go to the loft and just stay there for the time being until it, hopefully, you know, calms down a little bit."

There was a group of them: about five or six of them. And went back, anyway, went back upstairs and I remember all the women were in one room: in the living room. And all the men were next door just discussing, obviously, you know, what to do, basically, and what's happening.

And I remember I saw. I looked out the window and someone shouted. I can't remember what it was but someone shouted and I went to the window. I moved the blind. And I saw about three or four - I can't remember, I don't know what they are but you call them, they're like... they weren't cars and they weren't tanks - they're sort of in-between. SUV like a carrier, like an SUV for the troops. There was about three of them and another car or two just literally park up right outside the house. And just policeman - I don't know what they were - soldiers just storming in.

² Kosovo Liberation Army

And literally that was the worst moment of my life. Because we'd already... we'd... you'd hear stories of how they'd separate the men and the women and lead them out and basically execute them. And that was the worst moment of my life 'cause we pretty much been separated 'cause we were obviously in two different rooms. Not by... It was just the way it was. The women were in one room just discussing and speaking and the men were in the other room: already pretty much separated as if we were ready for them.

(15:25) I was with the women. I was. 'Cause all the kids. I was only thirteen.

PD: The older... the students and the older men?

AA: The students were still upstairs. The older...

PD: In the loft?

AA: Yeah in the loft. And the men were in the room. Obviously someone had told them or someone had seen the students come into the house. And that's why basically they came and they said, "You're hiding!" When they came in, I just remember hearing a Serbian soldier shouting and screaming at the old man.

And basically before anyone had left the building, the policemen were all in the corridor. We just said, "Don't move. Don't do anything." They took the old man out all we heard was one gunshot. And it was just one shot. Bam!

And we thought he was dead. He was gone. That's it. It's done.

And then the worst part was the screaming. And they started, like, obviously, my mum, my sister. There were other women there; the old man's family was there; my auntie was there and all her family; the neighbours who came with

us. They were there. And all the kids were there and we were all in one room. And they all started crying and screaming and thinking, "Oh my God. What's going to happen?" And they started leading, basically, all the men that were in the other room opposite us, outside, with their hands behind their head, and going outside. And I just remember my dad's look towards us, because he turned as he left and that was probably... that was the most horrible moment I would say I've ever, ever experienced.

Anyway they went outside and then not long after that we actually saw the old man: so they hadn't shot him. I don't know what the gun... we still don't know what the gunshot was. We don't know what had happened. But the old man was still ok and he was still alive when we went outside. He was outside. 'Cause they led us all outside, men, women, whoever, everyone was outside.

The only person that was still left in the whole house was my grandma who was... who had been, at this point, paralysed, so she couldn't walk. And she was blind in both eyes since she was about seventeen, eighteen, from World War II. So she was basically paralysed and blind and upstairs in one of the beds.

All the rest of us were outside: every single one of us. That includes my, just over one-years-old at the time, my brother: my little brother, just over one at the time. And I remember it was probably a space not bigger than this room so probably a space of, probably, I'd say about 10m: 10 x 5 if that. They were probably, from what I can remember, with everyone - even the students, everyone - there was probably close to forty to fifty people crammed in that space, lying on the ground with hands behind our head.

(18:35) And I remember, huh, I remember my little brother was next to me and he wouldn't stop crying. And I remember my dad saying to my mum

because they were getting... they were getting the policeman were getting - obviously for whatever reason, they were already, they already hated us enough - but they were getting agitated by the screams and by the crying and by the, you know, the non-stop, as, you know, as it was non-stop basically from when they got there and all the kids were crying and everything.

PD: The distress.

AA: The distress, exactly, they're going through. And I remember my dad turning to my mum - because my dad was not far from me - and turning to my mum and saying, "Shut him up, like, before they do anything!"

And my mum, I remember, turned round to him and in a panic and didn't know what to do so she started breast-feeding him, like, onto the ground, next to me, and he stopped crying at that point. And all, literally, that was everything... the only thing that was going through my head was how can I, sort of, protect him? So I remember sort of trying to almost go above him. So I put him beneath me. So I kept trying to push him underneath my body thinking that, obviously, if the bullets do hit us, he survives...

(pauses, distressed)

Yeah. Sorry... I remember same thing, again, with my uncle...

PD: Tell me at any time if you want to stop.

AA: No, that's ok. That's ok. That's ok.

I remember my uncle, same one who was leaving the flats 'cause he was quite old and fragile, obviously, and he had a walking stick with him, as well. And all of us were packed, like, we had bags in the car still, that had, you

know, we were... At any moment we had to basically try and leave. So you know, the cars were still in... some of the bags were still in the boot of the car: and outside and around it.

And one of the policemen: he's the only one to this day that I remember, in a sense that I remember his face. (laughs) And I remember his blue eyes... and he was the one... he was the one that was kicking my uncle while he was on the ground. So one of them, he went in the car to reverse the car because one of the cars was on a driveway. And he went in the car to reverse it and it was only because there was a big bag - on the back of the car near the wheel that was there - stopped the car from reversing basically running him over because he was lying on the ground bloodied because he'd been punched and kicked whilst he was on the ground.

And anyway that stopped him and someone grabbed him I think, pushed him out the way, reversed the car. And for what, I don't know what reason, to this day, while we were on the ground, they just... the abuse was non-stop, it was. It was: "You're... You asked for this!"

I remember at the time, as well, the N.A.T.O. planes. We kept hearing the N.A.T.O. planes over the border still bombing. Yeah, so you could hear them. And that made it even worse (in our eyes). Not that obviously it was a bad thing but because they kept hearing that, that kept making them even angrier and more agitated towards us.

PD: So they were bombing: N.A.T.O. was bombing things like the Serb barracks in Prishtina, the Television Centre and communication centres. But you were in the middle of that, as well?

AA: We were even... we were even scared of that because we thought they could try and bomb them and, you know, get us at the same time. That

was... I didn't think that at the time, I didn't know, I was 13 at the time. But my dad, this is one of the things that he kept saying, you know, afterwards he kept saying, "I was scared that they were going to, sort of, try and hit them and obviously kill us all," basically, "there as well."

That was another thing to, sort of, worry about.

And so anyway, for whatever reason, they decided. They said, "Right, get out! Get up, leave! Go out!"

So we were like, "Where do we go?"

And they said... that's basically what they said pretty much to everyone, now, now we know that:

"Go to the train station."

That's how they made most people leave to the train station; abandon their cars: leave the cars, on the train and leave towards Macedonia.

(25:22) And so we set off. And before we did that, actually, speaking of the blue-eyed man, the blue-eyed policeman, the reason I remember his face was my grandma being in the building, in the house, still. And because she was still in there, obviously by the time... they just said, as we were on the ground they just said, "Get up. Leave. Go!" Get out, basically.

My dad turned around and said, "I've got my mother upstairs. And, you know, she's paralysed. We need to get her."

And one of them, one of them said, "Go and get her quickly. Go and carry her. Get her out."

And my dad and - I can't remember who else – someone, went to help him to carry her down and put her into the car. And they did and they brought her down and the blue-eyed officer (laughs) and the most horrendous vision and sort of words - I ever remember anyone say, said, "Well what do you need her for? Have you seen the state of her?"

(Adonis is clearly distressed)

And that... that was probably the worst, the worst part of it... how another human being can say that... I'll never know.

Anyway he said, amongst other things, he said, "Just leave her there. I'll execute her for... I'll shoot her for you. I'll, you know, you don't need her," amongst other things.

But anyway we managed to get her in the car, in the boot of the car, actually, and removed the top part so she could breath, obviously, in the car. And the car, thank God, was big enough for her to do that and we just, sort of, crammed her in, basically, best we could.

PD: Was your grandmother able to understand what was happening?

AA: Not really, no. Because she also had amnesia and...

PD: So she was very ill.

AA: She was very ill. Very ill. Like, she wouldn't understand anything.

PD: But had your family been caring for her all the time at home but she'd deteriorated? She'd been with you?

AA: She'd been... she'd been with us, yeah. She was you know, two, three years prior to that she was strong. She was fully... she was probably my... She was my idol because being able to raise my dad and three other kids: my uncle and my two aunties, from the age of seventeen, sixteen or seventeen. Being blind, completely blind, 100% blind in both eyes: not seeing, not a single thing because a bomb had gone off in World War II so it blinded her completely. Being completely blind and raising them. And her husband died: my granddad died quite young, as well.

So it was basically her left to raise them.

And only before, two or three years prior to that she started deteriorating. She had a heart attack and that basically is what paralysed her. And that's where it went, sort of, you know... after that it led on to... to other things and made it worse and worse. But she was still able to understand us and she was still able to remember us now and again.

And she was actually the reason we're in Manchester. She's the reason why I'm saying what I'll come on to. She was the reason why we were brought to Manchester once we'd got to Macedonia.

Anyway, we left and we went towards the border: driving towards the border. The reason we didn't... I'm still not too sure what the reason why we didn't go to the train. From what I recall, I think my dad was basically, was really dubious, in terms of he'd heard lots of stories that if you didn't fit on the train they'd put you to the side and kill you and shoot you basically on the spot. So he was dubious in terms of going to the train station and leaving that way. So he said, "We'll drive. We'll start off driving." As I said: three cars again.

So on that point by the way, I still don't know what happened to the students. We don't know. We don't know what's happened to them. Never found out.

We drove towards... starting driving towards the border. And at one point there was a - as we were driving - there was one police car with two policemen in the middle of the road on what was, really, the highway, sort of thing. It's like a dual carriageway, really, more like... towards Macedonia. And this was probably half way through the journey, sort of thing. They stopped us and said, "You can't carry on this way. The road is mined. You will have to go towards Shtime," which was, at the time and still is to this day, a Serbian town or village. And we did because we had no... we had no other choice. Because they stopped us and said, "You have to go that way."

So we did. We turned around. We turned right rather than go straight on. Carried on that way, and literally ten minutes towards that journey, going that way... this is, if I'm not mistaken, I could be wrong, but I think Shtime, if you go towards that way it's a different route to... I think it's Albania rather than Macedonia. But anyway ten minutes/fifteen minutes into us driving - it's a mountainous area, really mountainous area - we stopped. And my uncle said to my dad, at the side of the road, he said, "If we carry on this way, we're dead, we might as well..." Because all that area is known for being Serbian: sort of 95% Serbian populated area.

And a lot of the troops - a lot of the Serbian paramilitary - and a lot of them were in and around that... they were known to be around that area. So we said, "We won't make it though."

Basically, he said, "So we need to either turn around or try a different route."

So we turned back and thankfully - these little things make you think now - but, for whatever reason, the two policemen, the car wasn't there when we

went back. So they'd left the post, the block where they had... they'd left the area. So we then... we turned that way and we went that way even though they'd told us the area is mined: because we had no other choice.

So we drove and we got to probably about, within about, maybe five miles or ten miles of the border to Macedonia and that's where the queue was of the cars and the people trying to escape: trying to leave.

So we queued up but we were way off. Way off. The queue wasn't moving and we were there for about... about a week. Not really ate very much: not at all. We had, I think we had some... I can't remember... some sausages... or, I can't remember... with us. That basically, that's all we had. And we had some water. And that, sort of, kept us going for about 4 or 5 days.

My dad... the police would go past every now and again. So this is the Serbian troops basically just controlling the area. So they'd drive past. They drive past every now and again: just drive past and then come back again every so often. And they'd stop, you know: they'd look around. They wouldn't do anything. They wouldn't cause anyone any harm or anything. They'd just be... just be patrolling the area, if you wish.

And we'd... my dad, actually, in a careful manner - trying to be careful because even trying to approach them was dangerous, obviously, they'd see it as a threat - approached one of the police officers who was stood by the side and said, "Look my family have three cars here waiting. We're not going to get anywhere near it. We need to get to the border and get out. I've got money, basically, can you do anything?"

And he just said, he just looked at my dad and he said, "Just get in the cars in a minute. I'll be driving. Just get out the queue, follow me. Go... come behind me."

(32:48) We did and I remember the panic in those eyes. It was, "Get everyone in the car!" Because not everyone was in the car, obviously, they were all, you know, stood around the area. So just get everyone in the car: the three cars we were with. And we got in the car and started following him. And then a funny thing was: I kept looking back - as a kid - and you'd see the brave few who'd take the chance and come out the queue and join us, basically. And by the end - there was three cars at the beginning - and there was probably about ten or fifteen cars by the end, by the time that we'd made it closer to the border.

We got probably within - I mean, at the time, I had no clue where the border was... all I saw was hundreds and hundreds of people, thousands of people just queuing up, basically - and it was about a mile off the border. But the border was shut: they were not letting anyone through at that time.

And we had to basically make do with the Albanian houses that were around the area: to go in and try and try and find food to eat. And we did. And my dad, actually, has since gone back to the house, after the war, when he went back to the house and he visited the family and he thanked them and, you know, told them basically what had happened. And they said, "You're probably the hundredth person that's come in to thank us. So, you know, don't worry."

But, yeah....

PD: Was that house empty?

AA: Yes. Yeah, so it was empty. So they'd left.

PD: For your survival?

AA: They'd left, that was for the survival, yeah. That was basically for their survival. Not just that house: all the houses that was around on, that were on the edge of the road, that we could go in, 'cause if you went anywhere further you'd be risking your life, basically.

But there were thousands of people, literally thousands of people that I could see. And they weren't moving. No one was going anywhere 'cause the border was shut.

One of the days, policemen, the Serbian policemen came round and just basically started telling everyone, "Milošević ³has resigned. The war's over. Everything is over. Go back. The Serbian Military has taken control of the area of Kosovo and you're safe now."

Obviously, we had no radio. We had no means of communicating with no one. So everyone started thinking: *Wow! Ok, had no choice anyway because they made you return regardless - what we were thinking - Ok.*

We started driving back, and a lot of people did, and it was probably not long, probably half an hour into the journey, when we thought: *Nah, this isn't right!* Because we'd look at the side of the roads and we'd look at... we'd see houses burning down. So we thought: *This can't be. This isn't right. This can't be right.*

Anyway, we had no choice but to return.

We returned. The only place we could return was to my uncle's flat and we were there for about a month, I think it was: from probably about April or maybe March to May time, yeah, early May.

³ President of Serbia from 1989 to 1997 and President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 1997 to 2000.

That was in Prishtina. So it was back to the back... close to where we lived. Yeah, it was a few blocks away from where our flat, our house, was: basically, where we lived all our lives. We'd returned there and we, again, went back to the one bedroom flat. And this time there were even more of us because the neighbours, my uncle's neighbours - who lived in the same building - would sleep with using that same one bedroom flat. Because we were too scared to separate into different... different... or what would happen to us.

Besides everything else, the main reason we were scared was that behind us - the building behind us which was a civilian building that had been emptied also - were what my dad described ('cause I'd never seen it) but my dad described as their 'base': the policemen's base, the Serbian police, that is. So they'd decided to base... to hide amongst the civilians or amongst the civilian buildings and stay there, basically: based there. There were quite a few of them. They'd come in and out like, literally, you'd probably see a handful at a time coming in and out: driving in and out of there.

PD: Do you think that was partly so it wasn't identifiable by N.A.T.O.?

AA: 100% yeah. That's what it was: embedded with the civilians basically.

And we would... leading up to that you'd see in the news, you'd see, you would see it then as well. We would see, like, the people. There were some bombings that happened where they were hiding amongst civilians and they were obviously targeting, N.A.T.O. was targeting the Serbian army or police or whatever and obviously killing civilians amongst it because of that reason: because they were hiding amongst them. And so that was another thing, obviously, again to worry about.

They'd come in pretty much every day if not every other day. A couple of them, a couple of policemen would come in just to make sure that we weren't up to anything, basically: sort of just have a look and check on us, if you want. They'd come in; they'd come into the flat, look around. Not do anything, really, just look at us and then leave again.

(laughs) And my dad kept leaving, now and again, to try and find a way , to try to find someone: trying to find a way to get us out. And he tells us now - we didn't know at the time - I knew it was risky obviously... to leave. But there was nothing you could do. All you had to do was think that hopefully he comes back, basically. And he'd tell us afterwards that he'd see police blocks, Serbian police blocks, where he'd go past and he said, "I'd see Serbian," what he assumed were Serbian population, " who was driving past horn... beeping their horn twice and waving at them." Or raising the three fingers, which is the Serbian, which was at the time the Serbian salute, if you want. And he'd do the same thing to make them think that he was Serb also. So he'd do... beep it and they wouldn't basically do anything: they wouldn't stop him. 'Cause if they stopped him, I don't he'd have made it. I think they would have killed him on the spot.

And he did that. He did that a few times until he found a route in central Prishtina near where Boro Ramiz is now. You know, where the 'Newborn' statue is: that building there. Not far from there is where he found - somehow, he found through friends, through someone he'd met. There were buses and there would be a few buses a day which would be full of people to drive towards Macedonia. He managed to get us tickets at the time. And this is one thing that I will always, sort of, I will never know probably how he did it but like, I don't know where he had the money, I don't know where he got the money. I don't know how... what he did because he wasn't working at this time. He'd been kicked out of his job years before that.

PD: What was his job?

AA: He was basically an Executive for the markets in Prishtina. So all the markets, there were probably four or five at the time, he was basically overlooking them. Almost like a Chief Executive so he overlooked all of them in Prishtina. But that was early nineties - he'd been kicked out of that job.

And we... he managed to get the tickets. We managed to get onto the coach, onto the bus. And I was... that was pretty hard to get on the bus because there were loads of people that didn't even have tickets that were trying to get onto the coach, onto the bus, for obvious reasons: trying to make it alive. And anyway got onto... drove towards Macedonia. Probably again not far from the border, we got stopped by... we got stopped twice. First time wasn't anything special, just, "Where you headed?" And that was that, basically.

But then the second time there was one reason why we were really scared and my cousin - so this is my auntie's son who was always with us, who was quite young, probably early twenties at this point - he had a National, like an identity card that we used to have back then. And pretty much all of ours were 'Prishtina', 'Prishtina', 'Prishtina' as the birth place or where you got the card from, I think it is. And his said 'Deçan' which is where we originally are from. Now Deçan was known as an area where a lot of the soldiers, KLA - Liberation Army - was formed and it was known as an area, in Serbian words, as a 'terrorist area'.

(42:46) He was with us and he had that written on his... I think it was the card but I think it might have been a passport. I can't remember: one or the other, his I.D. anyway. And that's what we used to have to hand in, obviously, for them to check through each one and make sure it's all ok.

And just as we thought all... they checked them all, all... every single one that was on that coach that bus was returned: apart from his. And obviously, straight away, at that point you think: *Uh-oh! What's going to happen?*

And my dad was outside he told us now, afterwards. He was next to a policeman, a Serbian policeman, who was playing with - I don't know what you call them - it's like a... in Islam you have the...

PD: Beads?

AA: The beads. He had a pair of beads on his hand... a pair of beads on his hand and he was playing with them. And my dad approached him slowly, just went closer to him and he said, "Look, I have, my nephew, he's such and such, he's got this and he's got a... you know...they've held it back," basically almost pleading with him.

"What's going to happen to him?" Basically, "What's happening, why've they done that?"

And this policeman said to him, from what I can remember, like, "Look, I've got these in my hand. I've got these beads in my hand. I'm not Muslim; I'm Orthodox. But I've got these from that house that you can see across the road and I don't know where that man is, you know, whose beads they are, I don't know where he's left. I don't know what... All I found was these beads when I went in there and they keep me sane." And he said, "Don't say anything" to my dad. He said, "Don't make any moves. Don't ask where it is, where the passport is. Don't do anything because that's what they're waiting for."

And, I was thinking in my head: *Why*. You know? When my dad told me this, I was, you know, just trying to figure out why he would do that and why he

would say that. Basically, he was a member of the army, Serbian army, whereas the others - from what you could see - were basically drafted in as policeman, new policemen that have been brought in to fight, basically. Whereas he, you could tell, didn't want to be there. Basically he said to my dad, "Just don't make any moves. Don't say anything. Wait there. It will be returned. They do this on purpose, as in, they test your patience, they test to see if you'll come forward and say anything: and that's when they'll react, if you do."⁴

And just as he said, they did basically... they waited five or ten minutes after they returned everyone's they returned that one, they returned his passport as well. And just said to us, "Drive on." Basically, leave.

We drove on: we got to, this time, a lot closer to the border. We could see the border now. Where the coach dropped us off, literally, it was metres from the border.

And we had to carry: myself; another man that was with us who was... Basically my brother-in-law was with us as well, he came with us, he decided to come with us; he left his family, came with us to try and leave. It was me, him, his friend - who was with us also who decided to leave, he was with us on the coach and he was with him at the time - he was helping us and the cousin that I just spoke about who had the I.D. from Deçan: he was with me as well. And four of us had my grandma on a... fabric. It was just fabric literally: so just four corners we were holding onto, basically. And I had like two, three different bags with me as well, trying to sort of balance everything and trying to carry her at the same time. And the... the Macedonian police,

⁴ "'Flaky" was the word during the war. One may have gone flaky because it was hard for him to watch you weirdoes. I've yet to see a weirdo go flaky; it's always the normal person that goes flaky. When volunteers came, half of whom were kinks, crazy, insane, none of them went flaky during the war. They were already insane when they joined up." Goran Stoparic in "The Scorpions: A Home Movie", dir. Lazar Stojanović, *Humanitarian Law Fund (Belgrade)*, 2007

they just waved us. They saw that we were carrying someone they assumed was injured or whatever and they just waved us through, basically. And we did and we went through and I turned around and my dad and my family: my mum, my dad, everyone, my uncle (everyone bar my brother-in-law and myself) were still on the other side of the border.

Now, we were met by one of my cousins who - she is married in Macedonia - and her husband had basically come to the border and met us. And he'd just got us into their car and drove off. Now, they were really, really strict the Macedonians in that sense because they didn't want anyone to go in that way. They wanted everyone to go into the refugee camps and everything else but my cousin's husband basically, at the time, he was quite adamant that he wouldn't do it and he managed to persuade the police to let us through and he'd lived there all his life, basically. And he spoke to them and however, he managed it. He managed to get us through.

We drove on and we got to his house and that was probably the first time that I felt half of a relief because I felt relief because I was alive and out. And I was free and I was, you know, I was alive, basically. But obviously I had no clue, thinking back, the way we'd been sent the previous time: we'd been sent back just before leaving, you know, near the border. I was thinking: *What if the same thing happens again: to them?*

(47:40) PD: To the rest of your family?

AA: To the rest of my family, yeah, because I had no clue, obviously, if they had made it through or not. We had no way of communicating with them. Anyway, probably a couple of hours of waiting, horrible waiting: they'd been let through.

He went back, my cousin's husband, who met us, he went back. So he'd just dropped us off, let us into the house in Gostivar - oh no, it was in Skopje at first, actually - in the capital of Macedonia at first, so at their house in Skopje. And he left us there. And then he went back for them and he called as soon as they got out and managed to get everyone through the border. Everyone got through. He just basically called us and let us know. And that was probably the most relief that I've ever felt. And then obviously they came into the house and I was just... that was probably one of the best feelings I've ever...

Yeah, so my grandma was with the rest of us

PD: You were all together again?

AA: And my dad, my mum, my brother, my sister. Everyone, basically, got there. And that's how we made it out.

Now my auntie lived in the U.K. She'd lived in the U.K. ten to fifteen years basically, before the war. She'd moved to the U.K.: lived in London. She had friends from the U.K. who basically advised her to go and speak to someone over there on behalf - who worked on behalf of - I think it was, the U.N. basically in short words who told her, "Look, we'll get you, basically, on the first plane that leaves for the U.K. because of my grandma's condition because it was getting worse and worse for her care and everything."

They said, "We'll basically get you on to the plane and we'll get you on to, you know, basically, into England."

My grandma's condition was that because she wasn't able to move and she wasn't... we had no means to obviously, you know, you had to clean her, you had to look after her and everything else... a wound opened on her

back and it was getting worse by the day, basically, because of the non-movement and because of how her condition was. They kept cleaning her wound but it kept getting worse and worse. And that was really the main thing why they had to get her over here as quick as possible.

The... the ten days that we spent - or a week it might have been - that we spent in Macedonia, we weren't in the camps, the refugee camps. So I can't complain whatsoever 'cause I've heard of some horrendous stories of what the camps were like over there. But we were at one of the houses in Gostiva: that's a separate city in Macedonia. They had an old family house there and that's where we stayed for about a week or ten days until my auntie managed to get us onto one of the first planes, basically, to the U.K.

PD: How did you get the invitation to come to the plane?

(50:50) AA: So I think it was all... my auntie did all that. I don't have no clue, literally have no clue how it all happened. All I remember was as a kid saying, "We're going to England."

And we're driving to the airport, basically. And that's how we did.

Details like that, I think it's hard to remember at that age because there was so much going on.

PD: And it was definitely the policy that families where there was someone with exceptional needs were brought to the North West⁵.

⁵ 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)

AA: Correct.

PD: So this is all very logical.

AA: Yeah, yeah. Exactly right. And that's basically what happened. Now when we got on the plane all I kept thinking was, "London, I'm going to London."

I had no clue where we were going. All I knew was that it was the U.K. and I think at the time - I'm pretty certain, I mean, I don't know about anyone else - I think at the time we were mid air we found out it was actually Manchester we were going to. And we landed. As we were getting close to landing, actually, all I could think, at the time I just remember seeing literally, green fields and that's pretty much a majority of what you see through the plane when you're coming over to it or when you fly nowadays. When I fly nowadays that's literally all you see. And I just remember seeing green, absolute green scenery and it was... it was quite late in the evening when we managed to get out of the plane and the airport.

When we first arrived at the airport, we were still on the plane, not left the plane yet. Because we were one of the first waves to get here, we were told we need to wait a few moments until we get out of the plane and into the building, basically. (laughs) I think there was quite a lot of anger, at the time, on the plane because of the Macedonian stewards. There were a few of them and all of them had a mask, basically, on their faces. And it was just anger towards them in a sense of: why would they do that, you know? There was nothing wrong with anyone in that sense, that way.

And they just told, like when they - after sort of twenty minutes, half an hour of waiting - the British representatives, I'm guessing, that were sent at the time, came onto the plane. And to be fair, I remember them thinking the exact same thing as us and them being a bit, sort of, taken back about why they would do that: the Macedonians. They seemed quite annoyed and confused by it.

Anyway we made it out of the plane and literally the first steps off the plane.

PD: The British didn't have masks?

AA: No. Not at all! Not one of them. Came on to the plane. Greeted us all and literally through a translator were saying, "You know, we'll get you out as soon as possible. We're just getting everything prepared and we'll move you out."

You know, and there's a few of us that are out there in the building. Sort of, there was a few other, I'm guessing, planes before us that were in the building, as well. And they said, "We'll get you out as soon as possible."

And as we were coming out of the plane and coming onto the tarmac I remember just seeing and there was literally probably hundreds of photographers, camera crews - media, basically 'cause it was obviously, as I say, one of the first waves of people to arrive. And it was just so surreal. It was like watching a movie because it went from one extreme to the other: from one complete extreme to the complete other end of the scale.

And we made it into the building, into the terminal building. At the time it was basically created just for us: I think hundreds of people there, all Kosovar families that were there.

PD: Do you remember the date?

(59:09) AA: I think it was the 11th May, if I'm not mistaken. I think it was the 11th May we arrived. I could be wrong but I think it was around that time. Early, yeah. As I say it was one of the first waves. It was probably one of the first waves to get here, basically.

We made it into the building, into the terminal. And they had everything literally in the centre, food, drinks, everything basically around, so you could, you know, help yourself to any food: anything you wanted. And they started, I remember, my dad had to go over and give all our names and date of birth, etcetera, etcetera.

PD: Did you have documents?

AA: Some of did. Some of us didn't. Some of us had... I remember my mum losing one of the bags at the border when they were leaving Macedonia, which basically had loads of I.D., passports and everything with them. So some of did. Some of us didn't.

And I'm sure there were other families that probably didn't have any and some that did.

That was all done. And that was done pretty quickly as well. And then I remember we got split up into different groups, put onto coaches. Small coaches, like seven seaters, basically, and we were then driven, basically, to... we were based in Meadow Court⁶, not far from here. And there was us and probably maybe a maximum of about ten other families: might have been less, might have been more, around that figure, anyway, who were based there.

⁶ Empty sheltered accommodation for the elderly had been prepared in Hale Barns, Trafford. See Cllr David Acton leader Trafford MBC recording in this archive

I remember I slept that night. I don't remember any of the rest of it. I just remember waking up in the morning and looking out the window and there was a park opposite. And the room that I slept in was literally right across, right above the park. I was just thinking: *Wow! This is surreal. This is not... this is a dream. This can't be real!*

As I say, it went from one extreme, complete extreme, to the other scale, to the other side. And yeah, we were based there at Meadow Court. There was, as I say, quite a few families. Some of them joined us later and some of them were there that had been brought over after that date.

But basically we lived there for about a year or so.

PD: Did you speak any English at all when you arrived?

AA: Not at all. Not at all. I probably spoke... probably a handful of words.

PD: How did you learn English?

AA: So we started. We had... actually, I probably started picking it up because we'd go into the park. We'd go and play in the park and started playing with English kids straight away. So I probably started picking it up straight away there and then. But we... so we arrived May and by September time we were in school. We started BTH, Blessed Thomas Holford High School, at the time. It's a Sixth Form now. It's a College now.

I think, even before that, we did have Mr Brown, I remember. We had some teachers that would come in and help us and start us, basically. Start teaching us.

PD: At the reception centre?

AA: At the reception centre, yeah, Meadow Court in Hale.

PD: What did you feel about the fact that you hadn't gone to London. That you'd actually come to Manchester?

AA: I didn't know what to think because I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know what different there was at the time. There's a funny story actually because I went to London a week after we'd arrived here. And that's another story, as well, because it was bang on central London where my auntie lived, right next to Harrods. So I'd gone from a war torn, burning country to that and it was just the most surreal experience.

PD: Kensington?

AA: Kensington, yeah. Yes. It was my auntie who lived there.

PD: So was she working in London?

AA: Yeah she was working here at the time and she's lived there quite a few years.

PD: What was her reaction when she saw you?

AA: Her first reaction was, she first saw us in Macedonia obviously because she had been there. She left the job - left everything, basically. Left her husband, so her husband (who was Italian, at the time) he was helping her and supporting her as well. She'd left the job, left everything and come to Macedonia to try and get us evacuated: to get us first out of Kosovo in whatever way. Even with her she had... she took all her savings from what

she had here when she came to Macedonia to try and somehow pay someone or do something to try to get us out of there.

Of course, it didn't work because there was no way that anyone could do that, really.

PD: But you were a priority family, anyway?

AA: Yes.

PD: With your grandmother and the health issues?

AA: Yes. Yeah, yeah, exactly. That's what happened as well: basically what it was, because of her health issues and what had happened, she managed to, basically, speak to the U.N. and obviously that's how it came about.

As soon as we came here, actually, my dad didn't see my grandma. She wasn't at the reception centre: they took her straight to Wythenshawe Hospital and that's where she remained for the next few weeks, just taking care of her until her condition improved, basically. She stayed there and yeah, I still remember going to the hospital every now and again with my dad and visiting her in the first few weeks and just making sure of everything. And, obviously, you know the care and everything that was there was just... oh it's... just you can't... you can't even begin to describe it! From what we'd gone... to what we came to: it was just unreal.

At the reception centre, it always sticks out to me and it always makes me so happy to think that you can get people, as I say, you can get two extremes of people, going from what we went through and what we'd dealt with and who we'd dealt with, to coming over to the U.K., to Manchester, to Altrincham and seeing people there that were doing everything - and I mean

everything - to make us feel comfortable, to make us feel welcome, to make us feel at home - if you want - at the reception centre. And literally you couldn't... I couldn't imagine any other possible way that could have been any better. We... we'd get everything, literally, everything; all the food that was necessary; all the clothing. And even above and beyond that, we'd always - probably every other day, if not even more often - we'd be taken to different trips.

PD: Do you remember **Bruce Thompson**⁷?

AA: Yeah, I remember Bruce very well.

PD: Bruce was a Methodist Minister wasn't he who visited.

AA: Yes. It was amazing. He's an amazing man.

That was probably one of the big ways in which, I remember, we felt and we got accustomed to everything and we started, you know, feeling really at ease with everything. He'd take us to, like, a swimming pool in Altrincham every day - every Monday I think it was. And that wasn't especially just for us: he'd take us and all the kids from the church as well so we'd mix in with all the English kids and everything. He'd take us to the church and we had like... they had play rooms. They had different days where they'd have different events, if you wish, there. And we'd always be there. He'd always say... you know, he'd even pick us up - even though it was probably a ten or fifteen minute walk - he'd always come and pick us up and drop us off. And it was just amazing. It was amazing what he did.

⁷ Rev Bruce Thompson recording included in this archive

And you don't think of it at the time. At the time, it's just us kids. All all we did was play and you know, we were happy. But if you think of it now, it's something else. You know, not something that I'll ever forget.

So I remember when we started school in September and, as I said, I didn't speak... I didn't speak any English whatsoever but it was a surreal experience. And there was about four of us, five of us that were within the same group. There was **Saranda**⁸; there was **Fatos**, who by this point had joined us here at the centre as well; there was Petrit; there was Adrian - and we were sort of a similar age group, basically. And at first always Mr Brown, who I'd mentioned earlier, we'd go up to certain classes: but not all of them at first, just to ease us in and studying, obviously, our G.C.S.E.s. I was, I think, year 9 when I started. And we'd always sort of have our little room: there was a medical room in the school, in BTH, where we'd always gather and we'd always go through the homework that we'd been set and Mr Brown would help us, you know, do that.

(01:04:40) That was probably with Sister Geraldine, of course, as well.

PD: Sister Geraldine?

AA: Yeah.

PD: And Alison?

AA: Yeah, yeah. With Alison, as well.

PD: You had your own special group of tutors.

AA: Tutors who would help us, yeah.

⁸ Saranda and Fatos Bogujevci recordings included in this archive

And yeah that was... that was what basically helped us to settle in. And do it in... even though we were, you know, slowly integrated into sort of, you know, the same life as all the other students studying for their G.C.S.E.s, it obviously did help us with the tutors to, you know, get us into it. It probably took us about a year. Took me about a year before I was fluent, pretty much, in English and that was - you know before I knew it, I was speaking it - surprising myself, really.

PD: It was a Catholic School

AA: It was yeah.

PD: Do you remember how the fact that you were Muslim children and it was a Catholic School, how was that handled? For example, were you invited to go into the mass? Would you want to do that?

AA: Yes. I did it. I did it and I'm glad I did it. And I'd still do it probably to this day. And I thought it was a really good experience.

I think what it was - the way you've got to see it - is at the point before we did any of that, we didn't know anything of any different. We didn't know anything like that existed whatsoever in the sense of mass being held in school, or anything like that, 'cause we're never used to anything like that back home.

But I remember the first time I did it and I was like, "Wow!" It was such a... such an experience: just to see everything and the way it happened and the way it was. When I first started there, I had no clue. I didn't even think. I remember my dad later on saying, like, they were told it was a Catholic

School and my dad was like, "So what difference does that make? Is it a good school?"

And they said, "Yeah, it's a good school."

And they were like, "Yeah, 100%! It makes no difference."

Mr Harris⁹ of course, who was, again, an amazing man: Head Teacher BTH. He did all he could to make us, again, feel welcome and do the things that he did like having that little room - it might not sound like anything, you know...

PD: Kept you feeling safe and close together?

AA: Exactly.

PD: When you needed it.

You were invited to participate fully

AA: 100%. Yes. Exactly right.

PD: As fully as you wanted to, in the religious life of the school? Do you think that was a good approach?

AA: I agree because it wasn't like you have to go to mass and that's that.

PD: You were given a choice.

⁹ Lou Harris recording included in this archive

AA: Yeah, it's there for you, if you want to join in, if you want to go and have a look. And, that's... it's your choice at the end of the day. You know, that's special, I think.

(01:07:42) PD: How did things develop for you academically?

AA: It was hard but it was good. I think - from what I remember at the time - so I was basically year 9 when I started. Now year 9 I started: I spoke no English. So two years, about, later on... whatever it is - two or three years later - I was taking my G.C.S.E.s and - I can't remember off the top of my head - but I think it was like six or seven Cs and one B and two or three Ds, something like that. But I didn't think anything at the time but everyone was saying to me, "Whoah! That's amazing! How could you get a C, you know, or whatever in English when you've spoken English for two years?" And I don't know. I really don't know, myself, how I did it but it's just one of those things I think, with everything that we got: and the help, the support and everything that we got.

PD: And maybe you're a bit of a linguist?

AA: Yeah. That too, probably.

PD: And what happened after your G.C.S.E.s?

AA: I went on to College and I studied at Loreto College.

And I studied there?

PD: So that's also Catholic?

AA: Yeah, yeah, it is. Yeah, Yeah.

PD: Interesting.

AA: Yeah. I remember at that time that was when I almost felt English, really because I was surrounded by... the only person who was there when I first started was Petrit who was one of the guys who I'd... we went to school together etcetera. And he was there but he was studying something else. So I'd see him now and again but nine time out of ten I was with English friends, English.

PD: And what were your A levels?

AA: I did a BTEC in Computing and I did... I got a triple distinction on that. So I was proud of that at the time, I remember, as well.

And I left there and I went on to a university at Manchester Metropolitan. I did Multimedia Computing there, as well.

And I was there for about three years: three, four years, I think. I had to do a first year so I was there for about four years, I think.

But, yeah, the whole thing... by this point I think I'd... you know, everything, the way of life and everything was just, it was just normal to me. I'd got used to everything and so it was the only way I knew, really.

So we lived at the community centre, the reception centre, for roughly about a year, maybe - just over a year - something along those lines. And then we were... we moved out. We live in Timperley and that's where we've been since, basically. We moved to a house in Timperley so we were all - all the families - were placed at the centre, reception, and into their own houses... accommodation.

PD: Did you grandmother manage to come home?

AA: Yeah, she was still... she was in hospital for a few weeks or a few months. And then she was home and yeah, we basically took care of her. And she'd get weekly visits still from a nurse, from the hospital, you know, just taking care of her: looking after her. And she was with us for another couple of years after that.

At this point she wasn't really able to remember much or, you know, it was really... she was quite old at that point. She was into her late seventies, I think it was then. You know, she'd had a long, hard life, if you wish. But that was... at the end it was good to know she was at peace, really. And she was, you know, well taken care of throughout the time really.

PD: And your dad went back to Kosovo?

AA: He did, yeah, he decided basically not long after. So when - about the time we moved out the flat to the house, basically, when we were moved out the reception centre - he decided that he wanted to go back to Kosovo. At the time I was eager to join him. I was eager: I really wanted to go back because, of course, I... you know... all my friends and family. Probably my friends is what made me think: *I really want to see them*. As a kid that's literally all you know. That's all that... that's all that you think, really.

And I remember at the time my mum saying, "No, no. You know, we need to stay here. It's a better life for you here. You need to get an education. You need to, you know."

And I'm glad, I'm really glad she didn't listen to me.

(01:12:20) My dad had gone back, basically, roughly about a year after we'd got here with the hope of a better life there, really: building a future. He had a decent job, previously and that was basically the main reason he went back for.

PD: One that he'd been kicked out of?

AA: Yes. Yes. Yeah, previously. Yeah by the Serbs.

He went back and, obviously - I didn't know at the time but he says it now - but he's glad, obviously, he let us stay here. And he says he did it for that reason. He knew that if it wasn't... if it didn't go according to plan, or if anything was like that at least we were still here. If anything, obviously, he'd try and join us etcetera over here. Which is what he did, basically, a few years later, so roughly five or six years later.

We managed to get our Indefinite Leave to Remain in the U.K. and he joined us, basically, not long after that.

I work for an insurance broker. Bike insurance, I work for.

I still work to this day with my friend Petrit. He still ... he works there as well. There was a group of us who - Kosovar kids - who kept in touch and we all live, obviously, in and around Altrincham. And we'd all lived at the reception before that together. And we had loads of other - we all sort of still mention it - we had loads of other kids who were based, Kosovar kids, who were based in and around Manchester, North Manchester and other areas who we spoke to, you know, hung around with. But in the end it was us four become really close and we've always been like that. And to this day we remain, sort of, best friends, really. And that was quite a surreal experience.

PD: You did the poem together? You wrote a poem.

AA: Yeah, that, that as well. And that was (laughs)... and that was interesting as well. Yeah. And just doing that, I remember when we... I can't remember what it was called now but we had the... where Badly Drawn Boy¹⁰ was there?

PD: Cohesion¹¹?

AA: Yeah, that was it. The Cohesion.

PD: The Cohesion concert at the Lowry.

AA: At the Lowry it was, yeah. We came there and we had to, yeah, go on stage.

PD: With Bernard, actually.

AA: Yes.

PD: Your teacher.

AA: Yeah Mr Brown, Bernard Brown. Yeah. He came with us, as well. Yeah so it's...

PD: Because the poem was written just after you'd arrived, I think, in 2000. It's incredible that you had that English and expressed so much about what it had been like in the war. I remember one line:

¹⁰ MaK patron

¹¹ MaK's first album of Manchester music for Kosovo (inc the poem and Badly Drawn Boy, Doves, Elbow, Ian Brown, I Am Kloot, Lamb, Mr Scruff, New Order, Jane Weaver) Cohesion, 2001.

<http://makonline.org/home/music/the-cohesion-story/>

"*Twenty thousand hours in a day*"¹²

AA: Yes.

PD: As if time was frozen.

AA: Yea. That was it, yeah. And it was... yeah... yeah. That reminds me of - earlier when I mentioned my little brother not being able to play at the flat - not being able to make any noise, basically. You know, too worried to do anything... to cause anything, to make any noise whatsoever. And that's what it sometimes it felt like, you know, there were literally twenty thousand hours in a day. Time just wouldn't go. It was a surreal experience.

But yeah that poem was... it was such a good experience. You know, we could write and all put our different... we had all had similar but different experiences of the war and what happened. And we could, thankfully - thanks to everything else - we could at this point laugh about it and write the poem. But, you know, deep down we knew what it actually meant. But it was good that we could do that and put our words and put our perspective: put our views of what we saw, really.

PD: You're married now?

AA: Yeah, yeah. Time flies.

PD: Can you tell us about your wife?

AA: Yeah. She (laughs)... this is linked in as well. She lives... she's from Podujevë, which is where Fatos - who is also one of the group of four who

¹² The poem, '*Twenty thousand hours in a day*', written as a liturgy (1999) for the weekly school mass which the Muslim children attended, is included in this archive and is also a track on the MaK Cohesion album (2001)

wrote the poem with us and we've known each other all that time - so she's from the same town as him and she's a good friend of his wife. And that's how we met, basically, through them. And that's - thinking of it now - it's weird how that all came together. How everything, you know... how the...

PD: Because you're from different parts of Kosovo but you really met at the reception centre?

AA: Yes, exactly - how that brought us together and that's shaped my life and I'm spending... you know, I'm married to someone who's from a completely different part. And we met though... because I met, you know, Fatos at the reception centre - because of the war. Because of the circumstances of his family and my family, that happened.

PD: When you go back, Adonis - you go back to Kosovo to visit - what are your thoughts about the country?

AA: I've almost... At the time I remember - obviously I was a kid - when we left: the day I was at that border carrying my grandma over the border I was a kid. All I was thinking is: *I am never, ever, ever coming back and setting foot to this land again.* That's how strongly I felt about it because it was, you know, because of how horrible the experience was and what we'd gone through, and thinking: *Why would you ever want to go back there?*

But of course now going back, you know, it's... it's... all of my friends that I grew up with at the time, there, you know. I still see most of them. Friends I was - you know - in school with. I've kept in touch through social media and other means with them. And I still see them now and again when I go back. And it's a... it's a weird but it's a good, obviously, experience. It's a good... I always have a good time when I go there.

It's... it's basically where I come from.

It's my people so it's always going to have a special place in my heart.

It's hard seeing it as it is now in a sense that, I think, a lot of people have unfortunately moved on and forgotten what we'd gone through in a sense of: I thought because of what we'd gone through would make us stronger, make us improve, become stronger together. But as with everything - obviously it's a brand new country it's only been a few years since we've... you know, we've been independent - there come struggles. And it's been really hard for a lot of people: you know, unemployment is so high.

I see such a vast difference, sometimes when I go there, when I have friends who have, drive brand new cars: have everything that they want. But at the same time I have friends who have nothing, who have to make ends meet every single day: have to struggle every single day. And you do see quite extreme differences. Almost every other step, you know, whichever way you look, you can see one extreme to the other and that, I think, is quite unfortunate. It's probably a very small percentage who are very rich and I don't think there's a middle class, I don't think there's an in-between. There's just poverty and rich. It's... it's... it's not easy. You know, there's a lot of people there who just, basically, want a decent... a decent life and struggle to do that because of the unemployment, because of the probably the corruption that there is. That has sort of caused it to come to this, really.

(01:20:46) It's... it's not easy to see. It isn't easy to see and it's even harder to, sort of... I see it now from here but it's hard to... to sort of understand the reason why it's like this, why it's happening. And even harder to obviously try and do something about it, especially living, you know, seeing it from here.

I think I see living in England and in Manchester - because of the way life is here - people see... I think we see the world differently to how a lot of people see it there. I even compare that to my friends. For example, I think, it's very hard to try and explain to them sometimes that... like the way we see, I almost wish I could literally grab the whole of the country there, the whole of the people there, and just make them see the world... even for a day, from a different viewpoint.

I think that will come with time, though. I think that will, with generations and with time changing, and probably with... probably in sad way, really... the war has helped us because I think a lot of people, obviously, have moved to different parts - all sorts of different parts - of the world and because of that they will see things differently.

PD: Could I ask you something about this project because you were very willing to be recorded? Why do you think it's important, Adonis?

AA: I believe that a lot of this is sometimes lost in history and forgotten. And it's sad, really. The reason why I'm doing it... and the reason why, sort of, you know, I felt really happy to do it is... a lot of people unfortunately don't understand the struggles that some people have gone through. You'll see people in the middle of the street - probably Manchester - they could be of Syrian descent, you wouldn't know, you wouldn't know what he's gone through - or Iraqi or any other - it could be English that have gone through worse than what you've gone through. And I just like to know that, you know. Sometimes... as people, it's good to know that, you know, it's good to find out stories and hear the history of struggles of people because at the end of the day, I wouldn't be here today and I wouldn't be the person that I am had I not gone through what I'd gone through, and the same probably for every, you know, everyone else. Everyone has their own story, at the end of the day. It's just good to be able to put mine on the table so that, you know,

someone can maybe relate to it... maybe just understand it better. In a sense of what happened and what's gone on over the years.

I think that's probably the main... main of it. Just being able to tell my story and my side of how I saw things as a thirteen-year-old and obviously until now, a thirty-year-old.

PD: Is there anything that you'd like to say before we stop?

AA: I'd just like to thank yourself, personally, as well, and I think MaK¹³, as a sort of a whole, as what you've done over the years, I remember even from the poem, back in, you know, from organising that and doing that - not long after we'd, you know, got here - and just everything that was done. I think that's... that's amazing.

And just the whole of... everyone: literally the whole of the people of Manchester and the whole of the U.K. I think I couldn't myself put it in... there isn't any vocabulary that I know, or any words that I know, that I could thank them enough or, you know, paint a picture of how amazing the whole experience was: from when we arrived to, you know, settling down and everything else. So you know, from that point of view, I think it's good to know what I can put my story, you know, across and people can understand and can see how it was and then just really, you know, appreciate what was done for us and what we'd been through and how amazing it all was.

PD: Thank you very much, Adonis.

AA: You're very welcome. Thank you for giving me the opportunity.

¹³ <http://www.makonline.org>