

Amir Lamaxhema interview with Rrezarta Mulolli (06:42 mins)

1st March 2015

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R: I am Rrezarta Mulolli, today is 1st March 2015, and I will be interviewing Amir Lamaxhema for the Manchester Aid to Kosovo Oral Histories Project.

AL: It was 19th May, if I'm not mistaken, when we were taken as a part of the Medical Evacuation Plan, since my wife had been diagnosed with Leukaemia, we were flown there and that's how we ended up in Manchester¹.

At that time, as we all know, the fightings, they broke up everywhere around Kosovo and with NATO airstrike campaign², it was quite impossible to live in Kosovo and then we were driven out like, most of Albanians, at that time, estimated about eight or nine hundred thousand people. So we managed to get on the bus and cross the border to Macedonia and that's how we ended up there.

¹ 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)

² 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.

(0:59) My late wife, she was in Tetovo hospital [across the Macedonian border] and while I was running up and down to find some help, it was a team of British doctors who had visited her and they offered help, so that's how we ended up there. So I guess it was their choice, not our choice, to choose the town.

(1:14) When we arrived, first of all we were taken at a small reception centre in, I believe it was in Wythenshawe, and then after all the medical check-ups and necessary information that we had given; pictures were taken; our IDs were prepared and then we were taken to Lake District, Cumbria. Actually, it was a smaller place called the Barrow-in-Furness.

(01:15) When we went there, in Barrow-in-Furness, it was a school and then there were two rooms where people had, I mean locals had donated their unwanted things, like clothes and footwear, so that's how, how we got the stuff, because we had nothing with us, you know.

For me it was not so difficult because I could speak some English and then, I don't know about the rest, translation services. They were offered right the way from the beginning when we ended up at that reception centre³. So it was no problem whatsoever. Also, my sister, who was with me, she could speak English, so for my family, in particular, it was no big deal.

³ Meadow Court, empty sheltered accommodation for the elderly had been prepared in Hale Barns, Trafford. See Cllr David Acton, leader Trafford MBC, recording in this archive

My parents and my in-laws - they were there as well - and, initially, we were taken at that school. It was modified with beds and stuff, and then after two days we were taken to Manchester.

(2:40) My first contact with other Kosovars was after two days because I had to go straight to Manchester Royal Infirmary with my wife. And later on, I went at the reception centre in Hale, of Altrincham, and that was my... the first time I met other Kosovar refugees who were there one week before we went there.

I didn't work as an interpreter, but after a period of time, Social Services, they did not offer any more translation services for Kosovars there so I, voluntarily, I assisted some families in their day to day needs, you know.

(3:20) Each family had its own tragic story so basically, whoever you met, whoever you spoke to, they had really bad moments to tell and their histories were pretty much the same.

(3:40) I had an opportunity to join a local football club thanks to the **Reverend Bruce Thompson**⁴ from Methodist Church. So I even trained with the lads for a few weeks. But it wasn't meant to be as I had to attend to my wife at the

⁴ Rev Bruce Thompson recording included in this archive

hospital. So I met people at the football club, Altrincham Football Club, people around the reception centre, and the locals, the neighbours... so made a lot of friends. That cannot be described, 'cause since the very beginning they would attend everybody. They tried to assist us with... when you really wanted to go somewhere, everybody were helpful. And we simply cannot forget that.

(4:14) Apart from the bitter history of mine, with illness and losing my wife, everything else it was brilliant, starting from the hearty welcome that they had prepared for us... kindness of ordinary people, of the community there: absolutely everything.

(4:29) Losing somebody you love, somebody you have been, you know, together since you were teenagers. That is the worst thing, you know. And there are bitter memories every time you look back to that period of time. So that was kind of the black spot of all this history.

(4:49) When I decided to return back to Kosovo? Well when we took my wife's body back to Kosovo for funeral then, at that time, my parents, they had lost everything. Our flat was totally looted: things were taken away. And then I saw that there were many opportunities in my home town because there was a camp Bonstill [Bondsteel], an American military base, opened and there were a lot of jobs. There were a lot of jobs there available. So with my English, I thought that I could get a job and support my parents who had

lost their jobs at that time, or, actually, they were not working. So that's how I decided to return back and start to rebuild my life from the beginning.

I returned back, actually, after my wife's funeral I returned back to England; I had to sort out some things. And then I decided to return back for good on February 17th of 2000.⁵

(5:40) It was quite different. There were no military forces of Serbia, and police forces. There were NATO soldiers all over. People were getting back from where... from other places where they had been expelled. So life was starting to build up slowly and people were getting back. So it was a totally different situation compared to a couple of months before when we had to flee on, on train, cramped: everybody. So it was new beginning. It was strange feeling but it was a good feeling.

I started working for United Nations Police Mission in Kosovo 'til 2009 and then I switched to EULEX, Law Mission. So currently I'm working for this mission.

(6:28) *Is Kosova home?*

⁵ See timeline in this archive: From July 26 1999 flights of returnees in the IOM Kosovo Voluntary Assisted Return Programme leave the UK. The Liberation creates conditions for the return of the evacuees though some 60% of housing stock is completely destroyed or very damaged. Many want to return to Kosovo to rebuild their homes and lives. IOM organises 32 flights enabling 2,906 Kosovo Albanians to quickly return. In Manchester many refugees, including children, need long term medical help due to injury.

Well, if it wouldn't be, then I, I would probably be still in England. Of course it is, and it will always be, with ups and downs, with good things and bad things, it's our country so it is. Definitely it is!