

Naomi Hamill interview with Pam Dawes (24:08)

1st October 2015

(00:00) PD: Pam Dawes recording Naomi Hamill for the Manchester Aid to Kosovo¹ Oral Histories program. And, Naomi, you have led the Oral Histories program.

NH: My name is Naomi Hamill.

I have been visiting people who are now living in Manchester but who originally came from Kosovo and came here (usually during the war). And so I've been visiting them in their homes, mainly, and listening to them and recording them. And yeah, so I'll listen to their story and I think people can be quite nervous about telling their stories because, I think, it's quite a big thing to do, and I think people don't really know what the emotional impact is going to be on them. And sometimes, I think, when you talk about things, it makes you think about things all over again but actually, I think everybody who has done it has - I think so - has found it a very enjoyable experience and yeah, I think it has sometimes uncovered emotions for them that perhaps they hadn't been in touch with for a while. But I think it's quite cathartic and it's... it's certainly a privilege for me to be able to listen to people's stories and actually sit with them while they're being honest with someone they don't necessarily know very well.

¹ <http://www.makonline.org>

And I think it's been very powerful, some of the things that people have said. And it's certainly been very moving for me to listen to them, and yes, so often I'll talk to them at the end and they'll want to say how much they enjoyed doing it and then they'll ask maybe a member of their family or a friend, and I'll go and interview them. And that's kind of like a chain really. It's a daisy chain of people who are telling stories.

(02:09) I think what's also important for them as well, is that they want their children to hear their stories and they don't want to forget them, because it's really significant what some people have been through, and it's part of their history. So, the fact that we're recording them, I think, is really important because their children or their children's children will be able to go to Manchester Central Reference Library² and they'll be able to listen to what happened to their parents and how come they ended up in Manchester, and how come they ended up in England. I think as well, sometimes it's difficult perhaps to talk to your children about what you've been through but I think it's quite a... it could be quite a useful tool for them in terms of exploring their histories.

Yeah, and I also think things come out. I think memory is incredibly interesting and when people remember, the memories you have are often - from what I can tell - they're often linked to very strong emotions. You remember things

² <http://www.racearchive.manchester.ac.uk/> and Archives+

and think they're nothing but, actually, the reason why you've remembered that thing is because it had a really strong impact on you. It was something that moved you at the time and so you've remembered it.

I think it's interesting when people are talking about the same event and they've got different perspectives.

I am studying for an MA in Creative Writing at Manchester Met at the moment so I saw, advertised somewhere, some training for Oral History. So I went to some training - two different training afternoons - which were really useful in terms of just practicalities about how to record and things that you mustn't forget when you go and also in terms of, you know, listening to people and kind of not talking too much and making sure that you allow them to tell their story, and not really interfering in that story, and trying to let them tell their own story but also asking questions that are helpful. So, yes, that training was very interesting.

(04:00) I've also had help from Jackie Ould at the Manchester Central Reference Library who's in there: Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Library³ there. She's also given some really helpful advice because she's worked on lots of projects where she's worked with communities and recorded their stories. She gave advice just about simple things like recording every

³ <http://www.racearchive.manchester.ac.uk/>

interview you go to because you do so many and think you're going to remember who you've talked to and when but, actually, just practical advice like that; it's really useful. But also how to develop the stories - what you do with them - is also something we talked about with her.

I think they have huge historical value. To be honest, I think anyone's story has value. I think everybody has a story to tell. I think one of my favourite writers says that, in some ways, all we really have is stories. And these are particularly moving, awful, fascinating stories. But I think that everybody's story is interesting, but everybody's little story pieces together to tell one big story in this case. I think just listening to people, and what they find important, and what's happened to them, is important. It changes the listener: changes that person when they tell their story. Yeah, so I think they're incredibly important. And I think they're important because they document a group of people who have come to Manchester and, you know, they've obviously changed the way that Manchester is. But also Manchester's changed them and it's changed, kind of, the course of their country's history and their history: their personal histories. And I think that will be important for their families and future generations. But I also think it's important for Manchester in terms of the way Manchester has accepted a new community into its larger community.

(06:00) PD: As a teacher do you think it provides a useful resource for teaching?

NH: Oh yes, in lots of different ways. I think Oral History is really interesting in terms of people telling their own stories. There are lots of pupils who have their own stories of moving from one place to another, or of changing, so it's something they can relate to. I think telling stories, and the way that they're told, is definitely something that is of educational value. And also, you've got the Balkans wars and in terms of the history, that is in modern history and that's also something. I think it's about community and it's about ordinary people's lives and how they've been affected by war and, yeah, what it must be like to be forced to have to leave your country.

I think, for me, that's the most interesting thing, and I think that's something is really interesting for pupils. There are so many different ways which they could be used educationally, I think.

(07:06) I hope it keeps growing. It seems like we kind of do one recording and then another one pops up and then someone else gets in touch and another pops up. So I hope that it keeps going because I think it's really interesting and important and yes, certainly something I'm really interested in developing. And yeah, I'd be glad to record as many stories as possible because I just think each person, their story is different and their story is significant and can't but fail to move people and can't but fail to educate people and challenge them and inspire them, I think.

(07:49) PD: Have you felt that these stories are not just about suffering but they're about hope and optimism and life as well?

NH: Yes, I think that the stories are very, very inspiring. I think they definitely are about life. They're about people moving on despite difficulties, people getting on with their lives and having really good lives and incredibly not being bitter about things and not holding onto the darkness but moving beyond that. I don't think it's probably as simple as that but I think it is definitely about people moving towards the light and moving onwards and to a more positive place with their lives than... yeah... so I find them very inspiring. I find it really inspiring to listen to the things that people are doing now, and the ways that they're helping other people, and the ways that they're moving onwards, really.

I think people are so resilient. I think it's incredible how resilient people are. The thing that amazes me is the people who are able to just not be bitter and it's quite humbling because I, you know it's obviously... everybody personally, and for me... it's difficult to not be bitter and to hold on to difficult things. But actually these people have faced much more than I have, and yet they're managing to do that, which I think it pretty amazing. It's awe inspiring, really.

(09:20) PD: You interviewed **Colonel David Vassallo**⁴. What impact did that interview have on you?

NH: Well, I mean he's a very inspiring, interesting, a really incredible man, a very unusual man and he's not what you'd expect of someone in the army. He's very gentle and very... he's incredibly humane. I suppose what struck me about that was firstly his skill, you know, his skill in terms of being able to operate and his abilities in that way and then also his forward thinking, in terms of using email and using the video cameras, to be able to help people as much as possible. And also, the ability to be able to take that risk because he didn't really know how that would work but, you know, he wanted to try it [development of telemedicine]. I also think the thing that struck me most was he was reading part of his diary and he was talking about the fact that he wanted to help people despite their creed, no matter what their creed was, no matter where they came from: the fact that they're fellow humans. I think he finds great inspiration in the fact that we all share a kind of common humanity and what struck me hugely, when speaking to him, is that his work for the British Army is actually humanitarian work and it's work about us all sharing a common humanity, no matter where we come from, what we've done, or what goes on for us.

(11:06) PD: You've also interviewed some young women from Kosovo. Did they affect you in any particular way?

⁴ Col David Vassallo recording available in this archive

NH: I think it's really interesting because I think it must be very... their lives must be very different to how they would have been if they were in Kosovo. I've spoken to a young girl who's about 17, who wants to become a nurse, and she actually can't remember coming over to the U.K. but she was brought over when she was just a baby. And I found **her story** really inspiring⁵ because what's so interesting is the nurses who made a big impact on her. She had a problem when she was younger with her legs and the nurses who helped her have made her now determined to become a nurse and she wants... it's kind of come full circle. So from very difficult circumstances, where she wasn't able to get the help in Kosovo at that time, because of what was going on there, she now is using the skills that were given to her, and she wants to use those skills for other people.

I've heard lots of stories of women from Kosovo and the drive to protect your family is huge, and to be adaptable I think... I think, especially for perhaps people who could have had a very different life in Kosovo - maybe older women, who could have had a life that was traditional - and what they experienced and possibly what they might see as quite idyllic. And their life has totally changed, but they've been able to adapt to something totally different. That must be really challenging, particularly if you don't speak English and you have to come here and you have to learn English and it's not something you were ever expecting to have to do. Maybe you haven't had

⁵ See JonidaBujupi recording in this archive

any kind of formal education and yet you have to do all these things. I'm sure it gives great freedom in some ways but it must be incredibly challenging.

I think when life is not as you expected it to be, you have to be adaptable. And I think that is really something that comes out very strongly: the ability for people to adapt to not having the life they thought they were going to have.

(13:20) PD: Naomi you have also led, for many years, MaK's Education programme. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about how you got involved in MaK and how you developed the education work.

NH: Sure. So, I had a very good friend called Anna. We both used to live in the South of England; she'd moved up to Manchester; her mum had moved up here and she decided to move up with her mum. And Anna was doing a Masters in Development, I think, at Manchester Uni. I think she was kind of trying to build herself a life and so she was looking for things to do and one of the things she spotted was - in a library - she saw a sign for a charity who were having an AGM and so she decided to go along to the AGM. And she said that, when she got there, there were just a few people but they were very welcoming. And by the end of the evening, she found herself having agreed to go to Kosovo with them because they were doing something: they were building a Peace Park.

So Anna agreed to go and, anyway, she went that summer and they were planning on building this park. But one thing that she noticed - she was a teacher - she noticed that there were lots of children who wanted to help and who were hanging around and who were, you know, wanting things to do and wanting to be involved and very excited that people are there with them. But they were, kind of, getting in the way rather than actually helping, so Anna decided, I think, to do some games and things with them.

And then, the next year I think, she took a teacher friend and they went back and started a little Summer Club, I think, with just a few children, you know, doing games and craft activities I believe. Then, I think the next year, that friend couldn't go, so Anna asked me if I'd be willing to go and help her so I said, 'Yes.'

So yeah! I came to Kosovo for the first time. It was quite different then to how it is now. I remember we stayed in a hotel called the Hotel Besiana which was interesting and we had to kind of beg for more toilet paper and more light bulbs and things, if we needed them, at that stage. And we used to go to the restaurant there and nothing was on the menu or you'd ask for everything and everything was off the menu that night. You might be given some pasta with some sauce or something. It was very interesting. And then we'd walk down to the Peace Park along this road which had loads and loads of holes in it. They were drains without any covers on them and it was pretty treacherous. And sometimes we walked back late at night and it was dark,

and there were no street lights, and we'd just have to constantly be warning each other not to fall in all the holes that were along the side of this main road.

So anyway, that's what Kosovo was like. I went with Anna and we went into a school and we did a little Summer Club. I think there must have been about 30 or 40 children maybe. I remember, some days, there were still UN tanks rolling around at that stage so, I remember, a tank would roll into town and then a load of soldiers would get out and give the children a load of pencils and pens and things like that. And we'd just play games with them and things and then go and see them in the park in the afternoon. And we had some other helpers as well, who helped us, and then I ended up going back with Anna the next year. And I think it became a little bit bigger and we had probably maybe 60 to 80 children and we had some Kosovar volunteers who were artists, but I think we'd managed to persuade them to translate for us, because I think the main challenge, the first year, was that it was just us people who spoke English, and the children so enthusiastic and eager but just all speaking and shouting at us in Albanian, and it was really difficult to communicate. And Anna was very good and knew a few words and she was also fantastic at communicating, without actually needing to speak, but that was a challenge!

So the next year we managed to persuade some of the artists to translate for that and us and that made things a lot easier. And then - I can't really

remember if Anna was there the next year or not – but either the next year, or the year after, she did VSO and she went to Tanzania to teach, and one of the things she did before she went to Tanzania was phone me up and said, “Please promise you’ll got to Kosovo and do the Summer Club⁶,” because, she said, she couldn’t bear the thought that the children would be really excited about us coming and no one would go. So I said that I would and, I think, apart from maybe one year, I’ve been back ever since. And it’s just got bigger and bigger. We’ve done more and more ambitious things and there’ve been more and more children but it’s been really fun. And it’s... the main thing is that the children enjoy themselves and have a good time and I think that’s what happens each year, yeah.

(18:18) We’ve taken over lots of volunteers from the U.K. so every year we probably take between 10 and 20 volunteers: sometimes they’re teachers, sometimes they’re not, but they all want to come out and have an experience in Kosovo and want to work with the children. So we’ve had people from... Pam organised for some people from Chickenshed Theatre Company⁷ to come over and to work with us and so we did a big theatre production, with props and things, one year. And so we’ve taken all those volunteers, and the last couple of years, I’ve taken - because I’m a teacher - I’ve taken some teachers from my school, which has been brilliant. And then we’ve also just got, kind of built up, a fantastic group of helpers who are

⁶ <http://makonline.org/home/education/childrens-summer-club/>

⁷ <http://www.chickenshed.org.uk/>

usually Kosovar teenagers from, well nowadays, from about 14 onwards. And they're keen to speak English and they're absolutely amazing and just translate for us. And they're just go good: you can't actually believe how young they are because their level of English is just incredible! And they are, you know, they've become our friends really, and every year they come and they translate for us and help us with the children.

And so now we're at the stage where some of the helpers, the younger helpers when I first came to Kosovo were about 4 or 5 probably and so I've seen them go up through Summer School⁸ and now they want to help, which is really nice. And we've had different themes; we try and do different activities. This year we're planning to do a festival of Peace and Light one evening and so we're going to make lanterns. A lot of our workshops are going to be based around light and colour. We try to think of a different theme each year and we try to work in the park [Manchester Peace Park]⁹ and do some things that are to do with being in the park in the afternoon.

(20:06) Everybody funds themselves so everybody pays for their own flights. They pay for their own accommodation and their own food and living expenses when they're there. That part's not expensive. I think for what we do it's probably very cheap. We takeout materials and lots of people have been very generous and donated things to us. And, you know, everybody

who comes is incredibly generous and buys things. So it probably costs us, I don't know, probably even less than a thousand pounds. I don't know, probably less than that, four or five hundred pounds But we take materials. We have some materials - we've had some donated to us from some schools - and so we are very strange because we go through customs with bands full of craft materials and I'm they probably think that we're selling things in Kosovo... I don't know! I've had to take some puppets out before, which the customs officers were quite amused about. I think we do it on a very low budget; we borrow a school when we get there which is kindly lent to us.

Stephen¹⁰, who was the Chair of MaK, I remember him saying to some volunteers a few years ago that the thing is that you think that you're going to Kosovo to help people but actually you gain so much more than you're ever going to give. And I think that's the case. Everybody who's been to Kosovo has definitely had that experience, so I think that people think that it's worth more to them than the money they pay and their flights and their accommodation.

(21:30) I teach in Secondary Schools in England and most of the children that we are with in Kosovo are actually Primary School age, so it's a bit different for me. But I think the children are a little bit more innocent in some ways. They're totally enthusiastic and they will do absolutely anything and they,

¹⁰ To see Stephen's work as textual artist including his work in Kosovo see www.stephenraw.com

even when they're 12 or 13, they'll still sing songs that maybe, you know, you might sing with younger children. They just... they love the creativity. I don't think they get to be as creative as children in England sometimes. I think the teaching methods are a bit different there so they absolutely love any creative task. They hate getting messy because they're not used to it, so they absolutely hate getting their hands full of glue; they hate getting paint on their clothes. But they attack each task you give them. You'd never get children who say they don't want to do it, or they can't be bothered. They want to do everything. It's more a case that we sometimes don't have enough materials to go round or we can't physically let everybody do everything. But they would do everything if they could. They're so enthusiastic and just lovely, absolutely lovely: a pleasure to visit.

The school buildings are in disrepair. Even when they've... well there are areas where they have been done up, some of them - over the last few years - so there are areas which are better. But they don't really have notice boards. The materials that are used I don't think are particularly good. I went last February to visit some village schools and they had heaters powered by logs in the corners and it's basic compared to over here.

You know, I have a laptop over here in my classroom; I have an interactive white board; the children can watch DVDs; we can watch clips from YouTube; we can download things. In a previous school, you could have a bank of ipads to use with the pupils. If I want to, in my school at the moment, I

can just say, "Right, children, go and get a laptop each from the lap-safe" and they can all work on a laptop, they all have logins and everything, whereas it's just not like that at all.

Children are bringing their own art equipment in Kosovo and it's very basic and they don't really have the creative materials... it's the fun kind of materials. I think they have incredibly dedicated teachers. The children are well behaved and they're squashed into classrooms: there's not always enough seats for them. And they're having to rely, I think, on out of date materials and they're just not technology rich like we are and the fabric of the schools is not of a good quality.