

Bleta Kabashi interview with Naomi Hamill (1 hour, 14mins, 35 seconds)

18th September 2014

Ok, I come from a family from south of Kosovo, from Zaqishtë which is near Rahovec: that's the main town. Both parents are teachers and I've got three brothers and two nephews, two sisters-in-law (laughs and baby talks).

Well, when, you know we've been through a war in Kosovo. Where I grew up in my village we had Serbians there as well. It was about thirty per cent Serbians and seventy per cent Kosovan Albanians. We shared a school together. When I was in year seven - that's thirteen years old - they closed our schools. And they wanted us to accept the Serbian curriculum. We didn't: we wanted to learn Albanian because we are Albanians so they closed our school. It was, "Either learn in Serbian and Serbian history or go."

So we decided to go.

(01.18) So then we travelled to another village for two years and then I went to secondary school in Prizren to study pharmacy which was same: we had to study in a house because all the schools were closed. Them houses were houses of people who left Kosovo, maybe a few years before because they were out of their jobs because they didn't accept what Serbians wanted them to do, like, didn't want to teach in Serbian or Serbian history. They didn't want to work for, in, a hospital where a Serbian tells them what to do. Maybe wrong, not right, so they didn't want to be there really. So then they left Kosovo, went to Switzerland, or Germany or America or even England and they left their houses and them houses turned into school. 'Cause they just phoned them from where they were and said, "You can use my house as a school." But we were not allowed to put chairs or tables or anything like that; we had to sit on the floor on the carpet and look like a normal room. And

keep a radio maybe, or a CD player or something in the room and maybe a few drinks or something, every day; maybe they went off but we had to keep them in the classroom so that if police officer's appear, we would just pretend that we are dancing; we are celebrating a birthday party. Even that wasn't allowed. We weren't allowed to celebrate a birthday party or anything like that because that's too loud for them.

I studied for four years. But I remember when I went to get enrolled in the school, I had my test at eight o'clock in the morning and then I finished my test and as I'm leaving the house, my friend's going in and she was like, "I'm so excited, I'm going to have the test in, you know, pharmacy and everything." But I left: went home. And two days after, I phoned her and I say, "Did you get the pharmacy and everything?" And she was like "No, 'cause police appeared in the school and took all their documents and all their papers and burned them in the garden." In front of them! So from that day, she has never studied because she never had any proof that she went to school.

For four years, we just sat in the class room on the floor, back to back, to each other, writing on our knees: keeping our notebooks on our knees and writing like that. And teachers were telling us, "Don't sit next to the wall because it's cold." You know, especially women, and you know their backs shouldn't be cold (laughs). But yeah, we sat on the floor. And then, because we studied pharmacy we had to do some work experience, as well, in a pharmacy so we had to find a Kosovan Albanian owner who owns a pharmacy to actually do this. Because in Prizren, where I studied pharmacy, there was Pharmacos, the factory that makes pills, medicines, but that was owned now by Serbians and Serbians were employed there. We couldn't go there because we don't have a school to study so why would you come here when there is no school for pharmacy in Prizren and you are Kosovan. Where did you study? Unless, you said, "I studied in Serbia," or "I studied in

Skopje," in Macedonia, or something. But if you did study in Kosovo that would be illegal and you would be imprisoned.

(05.23) So we had to find a Kosovan and go in the pharmacy, do your work experience and if a Serbian buys medicine and ask you questions, "What are you doing here? Where did you study? Are you doing work experience?" you would just say, "No, this is my uncle's, he has gone out for a week," or a day or something. "and I'm just helping my uncle or my auntie, I'm just helping here. I haven't got any pharmacy experience, I'm just selling medicines here," like a seller. So you wouldn't tell the truth 'cause if you... yeah, so that's how I did my work experience without, there's no paper, no document to say that I have done it because nobody would accept it.

Then as soon as I finished my secondary school, which is in 1998, that's when the proper war started, even though the war started ten years before slowly: arresting people; people were just disappearing; people were out of their jobs.

My parents volunteered for ten years. They both worked on TV but then they worked in the school where they couldn't work anymore because Serbians were there. They brought tanks. They were, like, "Either learn in Serbian or go."

And then we were, we did, like an organised...

Demonstration with placards and: "We want school! We want school!" They put tanks in front of us. They put big locks on the door and you couldn't come and we were like, begging them every day to let us use half of the school, at least, so they could use the other half. And they were like, "No!"

We got really angry with each other then, even teachers, the Serbian teachers and Kosovan teachers and students, and we were like, "We don't

want to see you any more because look what you're doing to us!" So we got like enemies before the war, proper war started.

(07:38) But then I finished. I remember, you know, you do prom nights when you finish school and everything. We wanted to do that and our teacher came and said, "No, you can't do it because you are not students technically in this 'Serbian' place, you are not students, you are just kids. They don't know that you have studied and you have a prom night, so you can't do it." And we were like, "We want to do it! We wanted a prom night; we finished secondary school, we wanted to dress up and look nice and have that experience." And he was like, "No! It's too dangerous to do it."

So, "Unless", he said, "we split in groups, like twenty, thirty people, but not the whole generation of medicine school". So that's what we did; we split into classrooms, in separate groups, like small twenty, thirty people in different restaurants. We couldn't do it one place like everybody would. So we went and we had to put 'Happy Birthday' signs on top of the table where we were celebrating - like we are celebrating a birthday party - and invite three, four teachers - not everybody - because the other three would go to the other group and the other three to the other group. And so, yeah, that was my prom night! Thirty students in a restaurant having a normal dinner and a drink, and say "Happy Birthday" now and then if we see somebody in uniform that said 'police officer'. And yeah, that's my prom night.

(09.22) And then, finished secondary school and went to university. I wanted to study pharmacy again but because I come from south - in '98 Serbians started from south, started, kind of positioning themselves in the road and stopping cars and buses and see if there is teenagers: mainly boys 'cause the KLA¹ appeared just then. So they were like trying to find young men and arrest them maybe, and question them: "What do they do? Are they KLA?"

¹ Kosovo Liberation Army

And so they kind of blocked the roads, you couldn't... we were scared to travel. But I really wanted to go to Prishtina where the university was, to study, because I wanted to be a pharmacist even though most of my friends and parents stopped their children going to school really because it was dangerous, because police would just appear in the school and take them and they would disappear.

(10:38) So somehow there was one day when they did a 'Stop Fighting' day, just for a day. And we got on the bus with a business man - Kosovan business man - who was our cousin, who knew some Serbians because he was in business with them, who said, "If you get them on this bus, at this hour, to go to Prishtina, you wouldn't be stopped because that bus is from this company that Serbians know," kind of thing. You would do things through a family member, or a cousin or something they know. So we got on the bus, me and my brother, my oldest brother, went to Prishtina while my parents and my uncle and two other brothers stayed at my aunties - 'cause our house was already burnt because we moved from our house. We went to Prishtina and I went to - this is all my school education story - we went to Prishtina and found a flat and went to university. And I said, "I want to study pharmacy," and they said, "I'm sorry but you had to be here in June and now it's October, end of October." And I said "I couldn't be here in June." He said, "Yeah, but you can't..." "And then they looked at all my papers and everything and I was one of the best students and they said, "Oh, it's a shame leaving you go 'cause you are a good student. I think, we'll find you a place, maybe in Biology, and then maybe study a year, pass all the exams that are similar for Pharmacy and then maybe you do a transfer in the second year to Pharmacy." Which I accepted.

I studied Biology from October 'til March when the NATO started bombing². I passed one exam in January (laughs) and then, yeah, when NATO started

² For NATO's role in the conflict in Kosovo see <http://www.nato.int/kosovo/history.htm>

bombing, we were in Prishtina because my parents came as well, to Prishtina: Christmas time. We couldn't stay there anymore; we couldn't stay in Prishtina anymore. They just... we heard that there is trains going to Macedonia so we organised to get on the train and go to Macedonia and leave Kosovo. So then, I had to stop my studies and everything. Got on the train to Macedonia. But we didn't actually go to Macedonia; they stopped us on the border, the control place, right between Kosovo and Macedonian border. We stayed there overnight: which it rained all night and got us wet and I got ill straight away the next day.

And, then we crossed the border and got on the buses; crossed the border and they put us in a camp in Macedonia which was where Bosnians stayed from their war. But because they came from a place where now is part of Serbia, they didn't have a home where to go back to, so they decided to stay in Macedonia for like, more than ten years until, I think, a few years after Bosnia built some houses inside Bosnia for them. And then some of them returned. But then we shared a camp with Bosnian refugees, we stayed there 'til, from end March 'til August.

NH: Can you tell me what it was like, the camp?

(14:18) BK: In the camp, well, first thing is (sighs) we didn't have any clothes, we didn't have anything with us because we just left the house with a bag.

We left the house, I would say, where we were staying at that moment, because we changed about four or five places, within two, three months, 'cause everywhere we went, that house would get burnt a few weeks after. We were moving from house to village, from village to village and then we moved. As Serbians were moving around, that's what we were doing as well. They were following us somehow. And then we moved to Prishtina. It was the

last place to get the war because it started south first and they were coming up towards north to move to Serbia.

They were burning, killing, south first.

(15:27) And we stayed in a house, little house - the family lived in Switzerland, by the way - so it was a two room house and we stayed there for three months and then when NATO started bombing, it bombed a police station near our house and all the windows and everything broke in our house. So we couldn't really live there anymore because the police station was literally ten metres from our house. So then that police station became like a base for them, because there was a block of buildings in front, near our house. And they used the basement of that building as a base for police because the police station was next to the building so they were scared to stay in their base in their police station. They stayed in the building. They knew they would not get bombed by NATO.

But when NATO bombed our windows broke. We were too close to the police: they were shooting every night. Every evening we would go in the roof and sit there for like, hours, 'til they stopped shooting, because we knew some of the bullets would get us. No glass, we put like plastic sheets over, just to stop the wind.

(16:37) But then, it was too dangerous to stay there, and my dad said, "Can we split in half because if something happens to half of the family, at least the other half survives?" So me, my mum and two youngest brothers, went to live in a flat where our cousin lived. She said, "Come here because there is an empty flat here, the family is not here and I've got the keys." And we went. But when we went there, that family actually swapped places with another family on the first floor which they were scared to stay in their flat somehow. They were working for some organisation maybe, and they were scared to

stay in their flat because they would get arrested. So they said, "Can you stay in our flat and we get your flat upstairs?" And we were like, "Alright" 'cause we didn't know what was going on; we just wanted some roof above our head. And we went in that flat: me my two brothers and my mum. And my dad and the oldest brother stayed in the old house to get, you know... not be together. If we get killed, somebody survives at least.

(17:54) They were, like, talking whole families from their houses, taking them, killing them, arresting them, they were just disappearing really. So we wanted to survive.

We stayed in them flats for two, three weeks, maybe, like that: separate, whilst NATO was bombing. It was so loud: all the glass was breaking. So the first floor, the ground was, like, one metre... two metres high in glass from all the windows breaking. And I remember I was playing cards. So if all my cards open, I knew I'm going to survive. So that was one of my things to give me hope to live really. Another day, really, to be fine.

(18:44) Well! And then we heard that there's trains going to Macedonia - which were quite near to where we were staying - and we decided to go. My dad sent a letter through somebody: I can't remember now. He sent us a letter to say "tomorrow at ten o'clock, go to the train station, we will be there and get on the train and go." But I remember (laughs), all the doors were guarded by Serbian police officers and they were like, putting people on the train to actually go and leave Kosovo. Nobody wanted to get in the train where police were standing. Everybody wanted to get on the train at the door where nobody was there: no police was there. So that door was so busy and every... people were getting on the train through windows - and it was so mad to just get on the train 'cause everybody wanted to get on that train.

But then police were going on the train to find young people and take them out of the train. So I remember some mum was hiding her son under her dress and put some bags around him. And my three brothers were all, like, teenagers. And they were all at that age where they would be taken and we were hiding them as well.

I had my cousin, who had breast cancer, with us as well. She went really bad because her doctor left the clinic two weeks before we actually moved to the, to Macedonia and she didn't have any medicines and she was really ill. So we had to take her with us and maybe find another doctor in Macedonia. And we went to the border. That's where they left us; we didn't actually cross the border. When we went there, we got off the train and there were loads of people: fields full of people and tents they built with piece of wood and plastic and a blanket or something and we thought we were just going to stay there a little bit until they bring buses or something and cross the border. And we asked people, "How long have you been here?" and they were like "Ten days!" or "One week!" And we were like, "What?"

(21:03)So we got prepared that we were going to stay there and then there were loads of aid coming from countries bringing blankets and bringing food and stuff like that. And I remember, America actually said to Macedonia, "I'll give you this million pounds... or euros, dollars... if you take everybody in Macedonia and then register them." Because what they were doing is they were putting people on the bus, asking them for ID, asking their names. So they know how many people are going into Macedonia: their names and everything. That's why it was taking so long.

It was, like, ten days. People were dying, ill. It was raining. It was chaos. And America just said, "Put everything, everybody, in. Put them in camps. Then take... register them and then you know how many people are there." So in one day they just brought, like, so many buses and helicopters and trucks.

And they put people on the bus and everything and like crossing borders really quick. But then they split half of the people that were there and took them to Albania. So they had to go right across Kosovo again from Macedonia border to go to Albania, because it wasn't enough space and place for them in Macedonia.

(22:31) But we, me and my family, went to Macedonia, even though they put like a border. My dad wasn't in the bus, so they said, "That's enough, that's the number, that's it!" and we are going, "No! We can't go, 'cause our dad is there, we can see him behind that line!" And they were like, "No, get on the bus and go!" And we were like, "No!" We stood on the door, we didn't want to go, because our dad was left behind and then we jumped from the bus to get our dad and bring him on the bus. And that was one of like the best moments. To get on the bus and you feel like you're escaping all that terrible thing that was happening behind you. 'Cause you even though you're in the border you can hear all the bombing; all the noise; all the burning; all the smells and smoke. Even there you weren't safe 'cause they, maybe, I dunno, they were saying, "This is neutral place, they can't kill you here." But we didn't believe that.

(22:34) So it was a kind of a happy moment when we got on the bus. But everybody was crying on the bus 'cause we were kind of leaving Kosovo behind and we were happy we were alive. And everything got burnt and destroyed in Kosovo but we didn't care about that, as long as people are still there.

(24:00) Yeah, we crossed the border, they put us in a camp, where Bosnians were and we stayed with them for three months. We didn't have food; we didn't have clothes; we didn't have anything when we got there. I remember, I think Bulgaria was looking after that particular camp and they were cooking for us three times a day. They were supplying us with clothes:

well, they used to bring clothes from different countries. There was like a little base, in the camp, where they used to bring clothes and we used to go and take what we wanted, what we needed. And we were really looked after there. You know, everybody, like, all the countries brought loads of food and activities as well, they were bringing, like, people to play with us and paint with us and keep us busy so we don't think of home, maybe, or... but there were loads of families which were split.

(25:12) Even Bosnians, they were telling stories how they're missing their brothers or sisters, or just like mum and dad and their kids are not there and even, and then, then... I remember my mum, as soon as a bus appeared, you know there are more Kosovans coming, and we would go to the bus and see if we know somebody and take them and stay with us 'cause now we settled, you know, we were there a week old. So we know now and go and get the young ones and new ones. And then, there was this family, like five, six sisters and the little brother that came. But they were split from their mum and their grandma. And this baby stayed with us; and this family stayed with us for like two weeks til they found their mum in another camp. And they got them together and this mum come in. She can't recognise her son: her baby boy. She's talking to all the girls and she's like, "Where is he?" And they're like, "There, sleeping!" And she was like, "No, no!" - I can't remember his name - "I want him, where is he?" It's like, "Mum, this is him!" And it's like, "No way!" 'Cause he'd lost that much weight she couldn't recognise her own baby. And that was the moment everybody cried when they got together: hugging, mum and baby. And this little tiny baby: they'd split in crowd and they couldn't find each other.

And then everybody started going back to Kosovo straight, in June, '99, when the war was over. We stayed 'til August cos our house was burnt like, really early, because my family come from south; I come from south; our house was in south; so that's where it first started. Well, it started in Drenica in

centre of Kosovo but then it moved south and then coming up north. So my dad was like, "Let's stay here, we've got food and everything. Why would we go back to Kosovo? We haven't got a house; we haven't got anything there. Let's stay a little bit longer until more aid comes to Kosovo, more food of course, and tents and then somebody does something and then we go back." And we decided to stay 'til August: another two months.

(27:48) And we went back. We went back: we didn't think the house would be that burnt: it was just walls, like it was gone. And then we put a tent in our garden and we stayed there for a few months until a friend of my dad's phoned. He lived in Switzerland. He said, "I've got a flat in Rahovec and you can go and stay. Use my flat; you don't have to pay rent or anything, just pay bills, if you can afford. If not, when I come back from Switzerland, I will pay them." He said, "Go and use it". It was one bedroom flat: four children, me and three brothers, my mum and dad. We all stayed there together: slept in one room. It wasn't ideal but it was better than a tent as my mum would wake up every morning to check for snakes and stuff: under the tent or inside the tent. Like, little insects or animals would come in and she would not sleep all night to make sure we are alright, so they're not eating us.

Yeah. So we stayed in that flat for another year or something 'til we got some organisation that brought some building material to build our house, at least, a room, or put a roof or something on. And we helped a little bit 'cause my dad, my mum and dad went back to teaching again in September, straight away, so they started, I think, getting paid, I'm not sure, 'cause I started work as well. 'Cause when I came back from war, I wanted to study again. All my books were burnt and everything: I had to start from beginning. And my dad said, "Why don't you study English?"

(29:30) I actually went to study English because we had loads of humanitarian organisations that needed people who speak English and

English was very then popular to study and to speak. And my dad said, "Leave Biology; go to English and it's in Prizren now - it's not in Prishtina - near our home. You can get a bus; go and do your exams; come back home. So you don't actually need to rent a flat and spend more money." So that's what I did. I studied English in Prizren and I travelled every day - or when I had lessons - and I came back home... flat... where we were staying and then I got a job straight away in the school where I went to when I was little, because they needed someone who could speak English.

(30:38) And I could read and write English because I somehow I always liked English. And then my dad said, "Why don't you come and work with us because we need somebody?" There weren't many English teachers then because everybody got a job with UN or OSCE or some humanitarian organisation and then teachers were, like, something they needed a lot. And because I enrolled in English University, at least I had some proof that I am studying English, if not from the first year. Maybe I'll be better in the second year. And I remember the first year: we didn't have books. You had to write everything down on the blackboard to copy it in the notebook and go home and read and translate and come back. And it was, like, we didn't have books. But that was our first year.

As a teacher, my students were bigger than me, really! (laughs) But it was that part of just wanted to go back to school. Even if you don't learn anything you know; just being in the classroom; sit on the bench and chairs and have a blackboard. It wasn't really about learning something. That first generation was gone. But it was getting used to the school now, and getting used to new Kosovo and everything. And yeah, then I was studying and teaching English at the same time even though I didn't even have one English lesson, but I was reading and learning with the... same time. I was going home; using dictionaries; translating the text before I go to school;

prepare a little bit; and then go to school and read and write with them. And learn, really, at the same time. But (laughs), I was better than nothing!

(32:43) And then we went back to our house: we built one room and we put a roof over slowly then getting some aid and getting some help from our uncle's cousins who have more money maybe... had started a little business. And helping each other to put one window today and one window tomorrow: it took us, like, five, six years to... it's not complete yet. Actually, we never built the second floor because our house got a crack from bombing and some engineer told us that you can't build a second floor or put any heavy stuff because the house will not be stable. You know, it's not really strong enough. So then we blocked the second floor: put the roof. And we're not using it all so it's not really complete. So we only use one floor but we wanted to stay there; we wanted our old house. And all our memories and pictures and toys and books and all little baby clothes are all gone. Everything started from zero: from beginning.

First thing, it was about surviving really. About how much can we get today to survive, just for one day? We were trying to, like, find more food and bring more clothes and trying to settle from zero. It was just starting your life from zero, from everything: no pictures in the house that we've taken all our life; no clothes; no food. Nothing! So it was all about starting your life from beginning, from zero. Finding more, like, food... This is all my parents... really... We never understood what they were going through. We were just asking, "Can I have this? Can I have that? Can I have this? Can I have that?" I just wanted to be a normal teenager, really. "Can I have this much money because I need it for this book and I need it for this, this, and I need that. I need to pay my rent! All my friends going to a party! Can I have ten Euros? Can I go here?" And they were like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." But I would never understand that they don't have it. But they never said, "No." How? I don't know.

(35:13) I just remember, before the war, when they were working as teachers, well, they worked as teachers but they volunteered as they'd stopped working for Serbian government. They didn't get paid. I remember my mum making flowers: that's how we survived. She had a friend who was a dress maker and she, my mum, went to her and said, "Can I work for you? Can I do some stitches? Can I put some buttons on your dresses or can I iron your dresses 'cause I need money." And she was like, "I know what you can do." Really, 'cause it was that time. It was in fashion to have big dresses with loads of flowers and stuff. She was like, "I know what you can do. You can make flowers for my dresses." She taught my mum for a day how to make them and told her what to buy and what to have to make the flowers. And then we started. And she was a very famous dress maker, or fashion dress designer or whatever, and we really survived from them flowers.

(36:28) My mum was making loads and me and my brothers were helping and wrapping all the flowers and making them and asking my mum, "Have you got any more... is there, oh my God, we've got one hundred!" It was really, like, we would look forward to go home and make flowers because we'll have money and then we'll have better food that night and (laughs) and I remember my brother telling one neighbour, "Do you want to buy some flowers from us because we only eat pasta every day. Can you buy some flowers and then we can eat something better today?" And he always mentions that every time he sees my brother. He says, "Lume, can you remember when you said this? 'Buy some flowers from us and we can have better food tonight.'"

Yeah.

But we wouldn't understand why all this is happening. We would live a normal life as well: fall in love and go out with your friends and get together with girls, and have coffee and chat about boys. That would be normal, like going

parallel with everything else but the main thing was: this many people got killed, this many people got killed. I remember the TV presenter on the news, every single day, he would say, "Good evening, 302 got killed and massacred here." And the next day "duh, duh, duh, duh" but then it wasn't just on the news; we would hear from other people saying (gasps), "Oh my God in this village, happened this. Oh my God, in this village, happened this, happened this."

(38:12) And there's a funny story (laughs). I had a neighbour. She had loads of gold. This is tradition, in Albania: when you marry, your husband's family buy you loads of gold, like a kilo or two: loads of jewellery; loads of necklaces and loads of gold. The more gold you have, you show that you are a rich family and everything. And I remember she had four daughters-in-law and all that gold was in the house: like five kilos. And this old woman, my neighbour, would say, "I hear, I hear they're digging all the gardens 'cause they know Kosovars put their gold in the gardens and Serbians are going into the gardens, digging to get the gold! Because we left our house, everything is left there." And I... we knew that she actually put some gold in their garden and she was worried now that Serbians were going to go and get it. She wasn't worried about if her son was going to get killed, even though he was, you know, but she was worried about that gold. And she was like, "Oh my God! Oh my God! They're going to dig my gold and get it" And we were like, "Why didn't you take the gold with you and sell it if you need it for food and everything?" That's what my mum would do, and my dad. We would give away a ring: my mum would sell a ring to bring some money in the house. That's what she did before the war. She sold all her gold, slowly, that was, yeah, that's what she did. That's one of the things we, my mum and dad, did. They would sell all the gold, to bring us food really. And, then, yeah, she was worried about the gold and "Oh my God, they're digging all the gold in the gardens!" And everything and we were like, "Have you put some gold in the garden?" and she was like, "No, no, I haven't!" "Why are you worried

then?"Because she said she has some, you know, and everybody wants to go and see her garden and start digging.

(40:10) But yeah, that was another thing that people would hide, their precious things, valuables and put them in little or big - whatever they had - tank. And put them in the ground, really and cover them with... and go back after a year or two, after the war has finished, and have all the precious things.

What we didn't have that time - 'cause I know families who put all their pictures and all their things they wanted to keep - the basement of the house. And they cemented the stairs so then, and then they put ground if there was a little window or something. They covered it, the basement, so they wouldn't know there is a basement in the house: put carpet on top. And then after the war, they just dug all where the stairs were and everything and then went back to things they'd put in the basement. Like, people put, like, TV and sofas and everything in the basement.

But if they didn't have that much space, they only put, like, pictures and maybe jewellery, gold or whatever; pictures and things they wanted to keep, in a little tank; put them under ground near a tree or something and come back to it. Because if you actually had them with you - which most women had all their jewellery and things with them, in their chest somewhere or pocket or something - police officers stopped them and cut their clothes and take all, everything, like take the jewellery from their fingers or, like, their engagement ring or a pair of ear rings or whatever they had on them. And they will ask, "Have you got anything here? Have you got anything in your chest?"And they were like, "No, nothing!" And they were like, "Can I check?" They had to check and see if you haven't got a tiny little bag wrapped, to take all your stuff from you.

(42:30) But then life went back to normal: really, it was. I started working; my mum and dad started working; my two younger brothers were studying; my oldest brother got a job with the UN. And then... so we were alright because we had four salaries coming in, you know. It was good. But there were families really, really struggling, with nothing left. They didn't have a job. If they were not, maybe, educated, they couldn't find a job. Yeah, it was lots of building jobs but there wasn't enough money because all the buildings were done by charities and stuff like that so everything was volunteer... people who were volunteering to finish the house because this family really needs it. So there wasn't money.

(43:33) And, yeah, it was all about building Kosovo. Building schools: there were schools that were burnt. Trying to start our government. I remember elections happening because I worked on the first, very first, elections in Kosovo as a translator, actually, with OSCE. I couldn't speak any English. I couldn't even say the time but I could say, "Yes, my name is Bleta," and, "Hello, and how are you?" Things like that that. But they were like, "Yeah, that's fine!" They needed maybe somebody to help rather than to translate 'cause they didn't really need to translate. They just needed somebody to be there, maybe count all the votes and help with the, you know, like, trying to tell people where to go and what to do and stuff like that but they were...

(44:33) I remember, this is American, Roberta, which I thought was a man when they said you're going to work with Robert, they spelled it wrong as well, and when she appeared, "Robert? Roberta?" She was like, "Roberta! It was spelt wrong!" "Sorry", I remember, yeah, she was talking so loud 'cause she thought that if she speaks loud, I will understand better, she was like, "HELLO, BLETA!" Like, yeah, I'm not deaf! "(laughs) Just be clear, but not that loud 'cause I was trying to tell her that if you speak slowly and clear, I understand but if you have an accent it will be very difficult for me. And she was like, slowly, clear but loud as well. And I was like, "No, no, you don't need

to be loud!" She was like "HELLO, I AM ROBERTA, FROM THIS!" and I was like, "Yeah, ok, ok!"

Yeah, that was elections.

(45:36) And, we were so happy. Everybody appeared to the polling stations to vote 'cause they wanted to have a president and to have a country with government and you know, (sighs) yeah.

(45:50) Because I started studying English and I worked as a teacher, now I can speak a little English 'cause the more I am studying, the more I can speak English. I could speak English at school as well before I started studying. I could say a few words and I could read and write. And I was always interested but then when I started studying and then I started teaching as well, at the same time, my English got a little bit better. But I had this... In end of the March, we always had one week holiday at school and I would always go and visit my mum's family in Podujeva, which my mum comes from Podujeva. I would always go there because I have cousins my age and spent time.

I went to see my cousin and, I remember, I went to sleep that night, the night before I met the English and I went to sleep and I was dreaming all night, *I am flying and I'm going to England* and somehow, I don't know why, it was all travelling to England and I tried to speak English, and I'm like, *oh, I'm going to England* and everything because England was my main, like, thing at that time because I would study in English and about Big Ben and about everything in England. And (laughs) even my dreams were about England and then I woke up in the morning and my cousin, my cousin Luli, whose cousin is **Saranda Bogujevci**³ - so we are kinda of related - he said, "There are

³ Saranda Bogujevci recording available in this archive

some English people in Podujeve, that came to do something in the park⁴” but because he knows Saranda’s family and because MaK came really for that reason, he said, “they need somebody to help them in English. Can you just go out and be with them. Just show them around Podujeva, even if you can’t speak properly, just show them around, tell them where the restaurants are and help them a little bit.”

(48:09) This is first time, well second time maybe, ‘cause Pam came, **Pam**⁵ came to Kosovo with **Paul** and... can’t remember... Tom, I think it was once. But this is second time that they came to Kosovo, ‘cause Jane Knight as well from Eden Project, Pam and Paul and I can’t remember who else. There was another guy with white hair: I think he died, from MaK. I can’t remember his name (pauses) can’t remember him.

Yeah, I can’t remember his name⁶.

I just, because I, my cousin was driving the van with the English, people, he said, “Bee, I can’t speak any English, can you come with me?” I said, “Yeah, ok,” and I went. And the, it was a good thing because I helped them but they helped me as well with the English because every time I said something, Pam or somebody would go, like this, to correct me. Maybe they didn’t but in another time, they would say the exact thing but in the proper English and I was like, “Ah, that’s how you say it!” I am learning English at the same time: helping and learning.

And then, yeah, I spent a week... I spent a week with Pam and Jane and Paul and Tony, I think it was, I can’t remember his name; just going to the park; going to the municipality; trying to get the land, get the park, trying to see the place and going in the park. And it was the first thing: we went to the

⁴ <http://makonline.org/home/peace-park/>

⁵ Pam Dawes and Paul Guest recordings available in this archive

⁶ Tony Collinson, MaK chair at that time

park and mainly it was about trying to take, get, the land, really, and tell the municipality people that the aim and why we are here: what are we going to do, really, what's all MaK about.

(50:29) So they all agreed: "You can have the park, you can start work; you can do, you know, what you need to do." Jane started designing all the project and the place and everything. I remember we went to this meeting somewhere and she said, "I'm Jane Knight," and the guy stood up from this organisation and said, "Jane Knight from Eden Project⁷." "Yeah" "What are you doing here?" He stood up and he gave her his chair and he said, "Please sit down here." He recognised Jane and knew that she comes from Eden Project and she's like famous and he was like, "Oh my God, I can't believe I'm meeting you here!" And I didn't know 'til then that she's that famous, you know: she has designed all the parks around the world and everything.

(51:11) And then Pam: just so lovely. Oh my God, I had the best time of my life, really, I would say, I would like, all going out, all doing things and speaking English. It was, like, all happy and everything and not doing things. And one week, went back to school again. Working, working, working, 'til they came back in October. I think this was March. They came back in August again. And they phoned me and they said, "Bleta, can you help us?" Because, in August the kids are off and we were off and I had free time, I wasn't doing anything. I went and helped again for another two weeks! And then every time they came back, they always phoned me and I always went back and helped. I stayed with my mum's family and I helped them and they helped me with English. And it was a good experience, as well, to actually hear and speak English rather than just study from books.

⁷ <https://www.edenproject.com/sites/default/files/documents/eden-project-peace-park-kosovo.pdf>

(52:17) And then, the next year, Mike, (my husband now), came to Kosovo as a sculptor, as an artist, with Pam and (laughs) he came with one, with Rachel [Rebecca], another artist. That's how Pam actually met Mike, through Rachel. Which I, for two weeks, thought that Rachel is his girlfriend 'cause they're always sitting next to each other because they came together. They were from Manchester. And I never really looked at Mike or anything, I didn't think, "I am going to be with an English man," or something like that because it's not a common thing, that a Kosovan girl would marry an English man. That's not really something that would happen. A Kosovan girl marries a Kosovan man: it can't be a different religion. It can't be from outside Kosovo, at all. He has to be Kosovan: Al-ban-ian.

(53:20) But even if he's a Kosovan Albanian, some neighbour would just say, "'Oh he's from this family... " They would find something to say and we would always worry what neighbours would say, what people would say if I married him. So I never thought of marrying somebody else, who is not from Kosovo, and I wasn't really thinking of marrying. But Mike was looking at me all the time and he was like, being nice to me, even made me a little flower, with nails. He welded a flower with nails and he invited me for dinner on the last day when he went back home. And he said, "Have you got a boyfriend?" and I said "No, nobody loves me!" I kind of did, the lip as well (laughs) like I'm going to start crying 'cause nobody loves me. He said, "Well, I like you!" And I was like, "Ok," kind of in a joke. We swapped numbers. Then he would ring. But he would visit every month. I was like, what's going on and he said "Oh, I've got a meeting; I've got to meet this man; I've got to meet this artist," and he never met anybody. He just came for me, I think. (laughs)

(54:30) Yeah we... then we started seeing each other for a year and a half while I got a job in a bigger school in Prishtina, like, one of the three biggest schools in Prishtina, 3000 and more children, 'cause now I graduated and I've got five years work experience in a school where I went to. Yeah, Mike was

visiting me and we were like now planning the future. Are we going to stay in Kosovo? Are we going to go to England? What're we going to do? It was easier for me to come to England because I could speak a little English, I thought I could settle better here than Mike coming to Kosovo; learn Kosovan; find a job. There weren't many jobs, not many opportunities for even Kosovans. So I decided to visit first. I visited Mike for a month. It was sunny for weeks in England and I thought this, "Oh, my God, this is amazing: a nice country. It's sunny. It's beautiful. I want to be here." And I came here and because of my passport, I couldn't work or travel, I had to apply for visas and everything, so then I applied for a visa that allowed me to work only. And I stayed in England and started working and living in England.

(56:30) After five months, I'd been in England but I didn't work which was very difficult time of my life. Loads of time to think and actually compare lives as well. Seeing people getting frustrated because their mail didn't arrive on time and me thinking (laughs + the baby is awake) about not having that mail at all because we didn't have that at all. Or, "Oh I haven't read this book and I'm really angry!" and I didn't even have that book, maybe. And it was really comparing lives and it was really difficult.

Then after five months, well we had to get married actually because of my visa: I had to get married and get another visa so I can actually work. Then, Mike was working in the bronze foundry⁸ and I went to visit and I was really bored, I didn't do anything. I left two jobs in Kosovo and then I came here, didn't do anything. And I remember one of the guys in the foundry, said - he just gave me a wax figure and said, "Why don't you just do something, you know, spend a day here." I was like, "Ok." I think I, it was really good in the end, he was, like, impressed, "Ooh, have you ever done this before?" I said, "No, never." He said, "Oh, that's really good!" Maybe he just wanted to make

⁸ <http://www.bronzefoundry.co.uk>

me feel better about it. And the next day, they actually offered me to stay and do some more work experience and see what happens. And then I did some more work experience: about three weeks. And then, I think, they liked me and I liked the place and I got the job as a foundry technician which I still do now - work in the wax department.

(58:33) My husband, Mike, he casts his own sculptures there as well which I started making: little sculptures as well. I remember this actually: when Mike got the job in the foundry, he made me a bronze rose and when he visited me in Kosovo, he brought that rose and then the next time he came to visit me, he never brought me a rose because he would always bring me a rose, every time he came to the airport. He would just, you know, get outside with his bags and a rose in his hand, all the time. I couldn't take it home because that would be, "Who bought you a rose?" Like, getting interviewed by my brothers, three brothers! (laughs) So, I would always keep it with me in the hotel or place where we were staying 'til it's dry and then save it as a dry flower. I still have them. And then when he made the bronze one... wouldn't... he never brought me another rose which I asked, I said, "Why you didn't bring me a rose?" because I had got used to it! And he said, "Well this one will last forever!" Which I still really want the real roses. (laughs) But he planted the garden full of roses and flowers. And he said, "You can have them every year now for a year, in the garden!" So the garden is planted for me, "full of flowers!" he says.

(1:00:12) And, yeah, now we both work in the same place and we have got our house and we've got a little baby. Maybe you can hear Albert. And yeah, I've got a happy life.

My brothers knew that I am in some kind of relationship with this English man. My oldest brother would always support me and say, "Yeah, it's your life, you can decide whatever you want to do and everything." My mum would

always go, "Oh, I'm worried what your dad is going to say." She was always worried and she would actually scare me as well. "What would dad say? What would dad say?" And because I was that scared, I actually bought the ticket, got on the plane and I didn't say anything that I am coming to England for Mike. I said to my family that I am going to England to visit Pam and do some work with Pam and MaK. And I never said, "I am going for Mike".

(1:01:18) And then as soon as I got on the plane, my mum knew, 'cause I told my mum, and she knew I am going to England and maybe never going back: yes to visit, but I will stay here. And she really cried a lot and my dad said, "I think something's happening and I want to know what's going on." And, she said, "Bee is not really going for MaK, she is going to stay and maybe marry this English man and stay there," and he was like, "Is he married, has he got other the children? Is she breaking up a family? Is he some old man or something?" "No, no! He's nice man and young. No, no", you know, she says "He's a nice man."

And he was like, "Alright then, what's wrong here? It's fine!" And my mum was like, "Really?" He said, "Yeah, it's absolutely fine!" And then, well I would speak to my mum every day: I really missed her and my brothers: missed my family and everybody really: friends, and everybody. And she tells me, "Oh you're dad's alright about it, you know, he thinks it's fine!" And that's when I felt okay. But I always felt a bit guilty somehow not telling him before I actually came to England.

(01:02:52) Now, I would if I could go back in time. I would talk to him and tell him, you know, "You see, I met this man, in love with him and I want to marry him," rather than just run away, get on the plane and come to England, really. And then... then tell him. What would he say then? It's done. He can't even say, "No!" 'cause actually I married him now so even if he didn't like it, I'm here now. That's one of the things maybe, I regret. I didn't tell him before I

actually came to England. But we are alright now... he loves... I'm his little girl; you know... he loves Albert now. He's just... we speak to him every day. He's fine. My brothers are as well - they met Mike – and it's alright now.

(1:03:50) But it's still a bit of 'the one who married the English'. It's unusual. It's not common. But for me, somehow, it's always been a bit different. Oh 'cause, I've always been different somehow. If my cousin had married an English man, it would be like, "Oh my God! She married an English man," and it would be really like, "Wow!" But for me, it was like, "Yeah, I think you were made, or you were like, I dunno, alright... you are okay to marry and English man because you were always different, you were not for a Kosovan somehow." They were always saying that to me in Kosovo when I go back. And they... everybody accepted it and everybody thinks that it was a good idea. And the main thing is I think it is a good idea: I've got very happy life with him!

(01:04:28) And, yeah, they are happy, my family. Think it's... he's alright... they met him, love him as well... So I'm happy, that's important, so yeah.

I feel safe here. I feel looked after. I feel... it's not perhaps that I don't feel safe. Well... in Kosovo is where family is; where friends are; where memories are; where my childhood is. And Kosovo is my place, you know. I would always go back there, I would, today, go back and be there if I have the job I have here and the house and the things that I have here: if I had them there I would be there now.

But I think, for now, I would like to stay here. And I think I'm settling here now because I go out in town and people wave at me. It's like, *oh my God, people know me*. And I've started to know people and I go this woman in the shop and she says, "Hello," to me and everything. I went to Kosovo last time and all my friends got married and they've... they're not there; nobody

knew me; young generations and I couldn't find any of my friends. It's like I was like a guest in Kosovo now. I feel home, I would say 'home' as well. I've got the house; I've got Albert; I've got a husband here, his family, his friends (now my friends); my work colleagues and everything so it's like: it's been seven years, I've been here so...

It was a bit difficult in the beginning to leave everything and start again, start trying to find friends and... friends, really, because family is in Kosovo. But the most difficult bit was when I came here, it was... I could see people had a good life all their life and I was a bit jealous I would say. And I would get really sad if I saw young people telling their life stories about how they went this country, went that country; how they read this book, how they read that book; how they seen this film, how they went to the cinema; and how they done their prom night; and how they've done their life in general in the 'English standards', you know. And then I was a bit jealous, for me not to have all of that, and it was a bit... 'cause, 'til you don't know, you don't really know what's there but then I came here and everybody telling their life stories and like... oh... ok.

(01:08:10) But then, everybody wanted to hear my life story which was more interesting than theirs even though theirs was nicer. Mine wasn't at all. But that was a difficult bit: comparing lives in the beginning. I still do. I still get a bit emotional and sad when I hear how people have lived their life, really. But I would really get angry and frustrated with how they don't know what they have. And they don't appreciate it. I am thankful for anything I have at home: if it's wood or it's not wood. Is it plastic or - whatever it is - it's doing the job and I'm alright with it. But maybe an English person would say, "No, it's not proper wood. It needs to be proper wood," you know... it can't be plastic... it has to be this. And I can't deal with it and it's like these things. Or the table is not square, it needs to be square. For me it would be a table: it's doing the job. But for them it has to be square. Or, you know, things like this:

"Oh the book is not 100 pages, it's got 30 pages." For me it's a book! "Wow, I've got a book," and that's important (laughs).

(01:09:32) Yeah, everything like this would just go in my brain and make me feel really, like, sad and emotional. How they don't know! He has a book! What else, does he want? No but the book is not red. It needs to be red! You know, like picking on little details because they're used to have it all the time and for me it was like, "Oh ok, it's a book. I don't care about the cover, it's got 500 pages," I can... you know... A table is a table; I don't care if it's wood or plastic. Yeah, things like this made me feel a little emotional in the beginning but I'm not getting used to it and I'm actually becoming like them. When I say them, is like 'English people'. I am becoming them and try to live the easy life, actually, 'cause they're used to live the easy life.

(01:10:39) I always have the other option, if this doesn't work, the other one will work, I remember (laughs), Pam, she, I think, first time, or second time she came to Kosovo, she brought me a really nice scarf. It was that big. I'm not really a scarf girl. I never really wear scarves or hats and things like that. So I really wanted to show Pam that I like it but I felt like if I don't wear it, she might think that I don't like it. So what can I do? What can I do? I actually turned it into a dress. And I put it on the next day and she was like, "Oh, my God, you're a designer and you've got talents!" you know and everything. "No Pam, I need a dress and I don't have money to buy one!" so life made me a designer, and made me a builder, and made me a hairdresser and made me all these things because I didn't have a hairdresser or money to go. So I just took a pair of scissors and cut my hair and cut my brothers' hair and my cousins' hair so it was like, doing it because we needed to do it. It's not because I have got 'talents'. And this dress is - I need a dress and I haven't got any money. So I just went home and took a needle and put it together into a dress. She thought that I've got talents. I don't think I had talents. I had a need to do, to make a dress or to be a hairdresser or a

whatever, talent, skill. I would turn things into something else because I needed to do it because... "Yeah, but girls in England wouldn't do this." I said, "Yeah, because they have the money and they go to the shop and get the new one, they don't need..." I used to turn my jeans into a skirt, just cut the legs, you know, turn my jeans into a little skirt. And she was like, "Yeah, yeah, Bee, you've got talent!"

No. No, I need a skirt: I haven't got money to buy one.

So yeah, it was a bit emotional to see the easy and the nice and the beautiful life and compare it with ours and my friends' maybe. Mine wasn't that bad. My friends' life wasn't that good. And it was a bit difficult to see a happy place. I think it's a happy place, it's a developed place and it's an easy life here. I can say that. It's very easy life! You're looked after: if my pavement's not flat and straight, I will ring somebody and they will do it. In Kosovo, you will have lots of holes, then. But now actually, it's actually beautiful last time I went. They've done loads of work and they've built lots of buildings and new roads. You know, if you're there, maybe you can't see it, I go there after a few months and it's like, Wow, this wasn't here and that wasn't there! Constantly being built and new things and maybe in five years time (laughs) it will be better than some English place, maybe. Because in here there are things that have been here hundreds of years and there everything has been built, but everything's new now.

(laughs) Even the internet is better than here (laughs). My internet is quite slow. There is fibre optic broadband and everything. And here is all BT and all old (laughs). Sorry, I need to complain and be a little British.

I might have a cup of tea and a biscuit, actually!