

## ORAL HISTORY INDEX AND SUMMARY

Interview with: Rina (Blerina) Ahmetaj

Date: 22/3/15

Location: Manchester

Total duration: 32.28

a Interview by Naomi Hamill and summary by Kelly Bücher:

The interview plays as one long recording.

1.	Start time	Finish time	Approximate duration	Brief description
	00.00	32.28	32.28	Rina talks about being a child during the Kosovar war and later being medically evacuated to UK. She describes her experiences on arrival in England.
Pen sketch	<p><i>Mother of two young children, Blerina is a Media Studies graduate. She was evacuated to Manchester from Kosovo in 1999. Blerina was born in Pristina, the capital city of Kosovo. She was brought up in a small town in Kosovo and remembers a very happy and playful childhood. Blerina's family had to leave their home during the conflict in Kosovo: she describes the interruption to her education, a restriction of movement and a time when the family had to live in the mountains. They had to move from house to house for nearly a year and then were packed into a train and left the country for the Macedonian refugee camps. Blerina remembers books being a great comfort to her as a child in the conflict. The family were evacuated to Manchester and Blerina was pleased and grateful for a warm welcome in the UK. The family spent a year living in a school which had been turned into a refugee centre. Blerina how looks after her young family and has recently set up a coffee shop in Manchester. She loves to read and write.</i></p>			
Summary of interview content				
	<p>(0:00) Blerina (Rina) says she was born in Prishtina but her family is originally from a little village called Arllat which is in Drenica. That's where she lived until about nine years old and then she, her parents and siblings moved to a little town called Drenas and is where her family lived until the war, until 1999.</p>			
	<p>(1:20) She talks about her life in Kosovo. Blerina describes hers as being one of the lucky families because they had a very happy childhood. She talks about being surrounded by lots of loving people, laughing a lot and playing. She talks about being treated with respect and considers hers the best kind of childhood.</p>			
	<p>(2:28) Blerina talks about the war in Kosovo. She remembers experiencing a normal month and then it changing all of a sudden. One minute they were going</p>			

to school and the next it was closed down. She recalls the town was flooded with tanks, military equipment and Serbian soldiers. She says this was because there had been an attack the night before in a village and someone had killed some of the Serbian soldiers.

She describes learning about the KLA, who they were previously not familiar with, and that they quickly started to get the picture about what was going on from seeing all the tanks and the military presence. She says from that moment on they were at war and, from her perspective, it was as simple and as quick as that.

Blerina talks about how the war affected her life. She talks about not going to school sometimes, depending on the situation in the town and whether or not it was possible, and safe enough, to go to school. Sometimes it depended on what had happened the night before as to whether they could go out the next day. She describes often being too afraid to go out, even to see elderly family members, as it was too dangerous and they may have been shot.

(04:00) She describes being locked in their flat, not able to go outside to get food and all the shops being closed, anyway. She describes another time when they found themselves living in mountains with just trees, nothing else, there were no houses, there were just the trees and a river flowing nearby. She says that often they tried to find shelter and describes running from place to place, city to city, to find a safe place to stay. Blerina says that they were often kicked out and moved on after a few days and this was a continuous cycle until they were finally put on a train and driven out of the country.

Blerina describes being lucky as she and her family managed to escape unharmed and she thinks that it's a miracle that they all survived. She describes lots of people being caught up in a war that they didn't understand. She describes lots of families, lots of kids who were just playing around in their garden, being shot at, and how it isn't fair that civilians were caught up in a war. Blerina recalls soldiers shooting at civilians for no apparent reason. No one was every safe.

Blerina talks about her feelings about the situation, at the time. She says that she was quite a closed off person and took refuge in reading to escape to different worlds, away from the horrific reality happening all around her. She says that she read a lot. They had televisions but they had no electricity to power them.

She describes standing on a hill with her family looking down and watching her village, including their house, being burnt. Blerina says it was impossible to carry on with life as normal so she just tried to escape by reading.

(08:10) She says that, in her head, she was already dead along with her family. She tried to make the most of every day as she was happy to be surviving through another day.

Whilst everyone was taking clothes and food to the mountains, she was taking books because she knew that without them, she would be forced to look at the terror all around them.

(07:12) Blerina describes an incident where there was bombing and shooting constantly going on around her but she couldn't hear it as she was absorbed in her reading and her mum had to come and pull her to safety.

(09:23) She talks about not knowing where her next meal was coming from or which direction they were going to have to run in each day. She describes having to stay in her apartment for a month during a siege and the family surviving on some corn - all that they had. She says that they could not just go to the shop and get more provisions. They used a wood-burner in the flat as there was no electricity for heaters. She describes the situation being different every day, sometimes it was more difficult than others but it was never good. Blerina says that her parents did a great job of trying to explain and make sense of the various situations they found themselves in. It seemed to her like they were living through something she would read about in history books.

(12:45) She talks about a siege, where two men came in looking for gold, jewellery, and any food they had. They asked her dad for money. He told them that they didn't have any as they had not left the flat for months. One of the men took one of her twin brothers and sat him in a chair and said, 'Right, you're either going to find us something or you're not going to see one of your sons again.' She describes just trying to concentrate on something on the carpet in order to block out what was happening. She thinks that the men just expected her dad to turn around with some money, but they really didn't have any.

Blerina talks about leaving Kosovo. She says that after the siege they were driven in buses to Fush Kosove, the train station where they were told to board a train to Macedonia. The Serbian police demanded payment of food, clothes or jewellery and Blerina describes thinking that the situation was crazy. She says she remembers it as she lost her favourite pair of gold earrings, which essentially saved her life by being used as her payment to the police. She says that they essentially had to give the Serbian police something for kicking them out of their own country.

(14:56) She reflects that her family has been fortunate not to find themselves in the direct line of fire. She remembers waiting at the border for five hours on a packed train and it being the most ridiculous situation to be in. She describes kids crying and people being sick, old people not feeling very well, feeling tired. She says that most of the people didn't have a seat, they were standing up on a

train: it was terrible.

(16:40) She says that they were then driven to the refugee camps by bus. She says that her family did not enter the camp but that they took a taxi with the last money they had left as far as it would take them towards a town, where they knew people. She says that they stayed there for a few weeks and then her dad told her that they were all going to England the next day, which she describes as being a shock to her.

(19:00) Blerina's family found out at six o' clock in the evening that other countries were looking for people to take as refugees and give them homes and her large family was selected to go to England.

She says how at six o' clock the next morning, they were driven to the airport, put on a plane, and soon after landed in Manchester. She describes an elderly lady hugging her tightly when she got off the plane and how she couldn't understand why the stranger was hugging her so much, and that it felt so nice.

(20:23) Blerina says that it was shocking to her, after living for so long with no electricity, to see it being used everywhere, especially for what she thought of as excessive, such as the many street lights at night.

Blerina talks about her thoughts on England when she first arrived from Macedonia. She describes shock at how different everything was and how she knew she was safe in England. She talks about no longer seeing people running. No one trying to kill them, and how everyone was trying to help them instead, feeding and clothing them and making them happy.

(22:10) She describes being driven to a refugee centre in Manchester and soon after driven to a converted school in Ulverston, Cumbria, where the family lived for a while. She talks about how she was initially mistaken for one of the girls helping out as she has ginger hair so she wasn't given any soup as they thought she was a volunteer, not a refugee.

She describes the centre in Ulverston like a big family. And compares it to attending a family wedding that lasted a year. She says everyone had their rooms and private spaces and then there were communal areas and each day they were brought things they needed such as clothes and meals were prepared for them. She says that they were treated with much respect from the people who helped them: largely volunteers.

Blerina says that four months later, she went to school, straight into year 11 and did 6 GCSEs. She says that she did not understand a word the teacher was

saying at first as even thought she had some English; it was at a different level in a British classroom. She says that she managed to pass her exams, somehow.

(24:25) Blerina says that when people hear the word 'refugee' they immediately expect those people to be different to them. But when they walked in wearing the same uniform as everyone, they didn't really look much different and the other students were largely inquisitive rather than anything else she might have expected.

Blerina describes Ulverston as a 'small place' so their impact was large on the community and people were very interested to know their story. Only a few people were negative; on the whole it was positive. She says that they didn't always know if comments were negative, it was often from other's reactions that they realised their negative context.

She talks about being brought up in a creative home: her dad is an architect and her mum's a social worker who always encouraged her to do something, create something and not just sit there.

(26:30) The family moved to Barrow in Furness, the next town, and Blerina was keen to start afresh without the confusing label of 'refugee'. The children heard about the Prince's Trust and they thought of a plan to do a magazine and to print it in two languages to tell their story. They put something about Kosovo, something about the culture, a little interview with some of them, and other basic information. They applied and got the funding and so the children in several Kosovan families got together to produce the magazine.

(27:00) She talks about being the editor of the magazine. She says that it was a free magazine that they distributed to help people understand where they were from and how they had come to live in England. They distributed it around the schools, libraries, all around Barrow and then it ended up being taken into other places around Cumbria too. She thinks that it was great because people were more familiar with the refugees as a community, a new community, of around 300 people.

She talks about going to University in Carlisle as they accepted her as a Home Student: it was the only place that didn't see her as an Overseas student. She says that they also allowed her to pay less.

(28:30) She talks about her dad getting a job in Manchester as an architect and her brothers going to University there, too. She says that after University she returned home, to Manchester, and got married to a man from Kosovo. She says he came over about 6/7 years ago and he likes the culture, and the opportunity to have a quiet life as well, that Manchester allows.

(29:22) Blerina talks about visiting Kosovo once a year. The first time she went back after the war was in 2004. She says it was great to see the place rebuilding itself after leaving it in flames. They visit family and take their children back to teach them about the places where their parents grew up. She talks about her children not really liking to speak Albanian. They enjoy visiting Kosovo and look forward to their summers there, but they prefer to speak English.

(31:00) She talks about presenting her experiences in the form of a diary or a journal that she and her children can look at together as she isn't sure how to explain to them verbally exactly that happened