

**Bekim Blakaj interview with Rrezarta Mulolli (16:12)**

**12<sup>th</sup> January 2016**

(00:00) R: I am Rrezarta Mulolli from Manchester Aid to Kosovo. Today on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2016, I am interviewing Mr Bekim Blakaj, Executive Director of the Humanitarian Law Centre<sup>1</sup> in Kosovo for the 'Oral History of the Kosovar community in Manchester' project.

Mr Blakaj, firstly I would want to ask you, for how long do you know the **Bogujevci**<sup>2</sup> family members?

BB: Actually I've known them for long period of time. I think that I have met the members of the family Bogujevci back in 2003. But then, after that, very often I've met members of family Bogujevci.

Our organisation is monitoring War Crime Trials here in Kosovo and if we try to have a kind of broader view on the importance of giving the testimonies by survivors of different crimes. I would say that it's of huge importance in the case of Bogujevcis. Even though they were kids, they were brave enough to go in Belgrade and to give the testimonies. In other hand, we have tried to conference different families - members of victims in other cases - to give their testimonies in front of special Special Chamber for War Crimes in Serbia, and they didn't accept it. So I would say the fact that family members of Bogujevci family, it is very important: It is very important for several reasons.

(2:13) First of all, they have succeeded to reach the justice: let's say a part of justice. And that is very important for themselves, but for the society in general. Another thing, another very important thing, is that society in Serbia

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hlc-rdc.org/?lang=de>

<sup>2</sup> Evidence was given both in Serbia and The Hague. See also recordings by Selatin/Jehona, Fatos, Saranda Bogujevci, and Paresch Patel and Pam Dawes, available in this archive.

had the chance to hear from them - so from victims - what indeed happened in Podujevë on 28<sup>th</sup> March '99.

I think that Serbian society benefit as well from their testimony in the court in Serbia.

Also their testimony has contributed to build that collective memory about the past which is based on the facts. And that is, I would say, in the future that would be the most achievement of giving the testimonies in this court.

Many groups and many communities have benefited from the testimony of Bogujevci family in the court in Serbia against members of the Scorpions who committed a terrible crime toward the family of Bogujevci and Duriqi and others.<sup>3</sup>

At least some members of the society from the stories, through the testimonies of Saranda and Fatos, realised what indeed happened in Podujevë: which crimes were committed by the Scorpions unit and others Serbian forces. Which means that actually they have somehow influenced the Serbian society to deal with its past. So certain members of Serbian society have to deal with their past, based on the facts so prejudgements against Albanians were somehow destroyed. Also so for Albanians as well, for Kosovo society, Saranda and Fatos were the first Albanians who went in Serbia to give their testimonies against Serbian forces. So they opened the door and after that, many family members of victims - survivors of different crimes - got their courage, by those kids, to go and give their testimonies in Serbian court.

This is really very important. We as human rights activists do appreciate very much their decision and braveness to give testimonies.

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<sup>3</sup> *'Podujevo 1999- Beyond Reasonable Doubt'* (English and Serbian), Humanitarian Law Centre, Belgrade, Documents Series; <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/jul/10/warcrimes.balkans>

Comparing other cases of kids who've suffered during the wars, in Kosovo - who saw their parents being killed and so on - I think that the Bogujevci family went further. They succeeded to go further to develop themselves. Of course, they won't ever forget what happened in the past but they are living their lives. And that, I think, this is important.

(6:50) To see the importance of making oral history interviews, we can just go back during the Second World War. Terrible crimes happened in Kosovo: too many persons were killed or went missing or suffered by the war. But now a new generation - we don't know what happened, indeed. You have different approaches to those crimes, different stories. And narratives are totally different. And we cannot hear what indeed happened from the survivors, from the people who witnessed those terrible crimes.

So the oral history interviews are very important to create that accurate narrative about the past. Because, in the future, future generations to come will have the opportunity to hear the stories of persons who witnessed different events, let's say.

This too, I would say: oral history will ensure us that in the future there won't be a manipulation with what happened: a manipulation of history. In the future the history will be based on oral history interviews. So I do really much appreciate whoever is conducting oral history interviews and preserving them for the future generations.

Can you imagine if we were lucky to have a testimony of a survivor from a Nazi camp during the Second World War [in Kosovo]<sup>4</sup>. That would be treasure today for the history, for everything. So what you are doing now will be very useful for future generations.

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<sup>4</sup> Historical evidence demonstrates that genocide and ethnic cleansing were perpetrated during the occupation of the region by fascist Italy and Nazi Germany

(08:40) It's really strange about events of, let's say, during nineties in ex Yugoslavia: so Croatia and Bosnia, Slovenia and Kosovo and so on. Different nations have totally different histories and narratives about the past. We are providing lectures in secondary schools so Humanitarian Law Centre in Kosovo is providing lectures on transitional justice in secondary schools in Kosovo. And it's really strange how biased is the view of the past of different ethnic groups.

What Albanian kids are taught in the schools is totally different [to] what Serbian kids are taught in the schools. I think that the same situation is with Croatia and Bosnia and so on. So relying on history textbooks and on historians in this region - I'm not speaking only about Kosovo - is very dangerous actually because they can bring us new conflicts in the future because they have totally different narratives about the past.

(10:05) Well Kosova Memory Book is actually... the idea at the beginning of this project was to collect as much as possible documents on human losses during the war and to try to restore their dignity in a manner to not let them become numbers and statistics but to create a collective memory about the past and to remember them as people: as a common people - who used to work, to have their families. That was the initial motive to develop such a project. During the years we saw the importance of it also in different areas when it comes to the reparation for the victims, when it comes to the justice as well. But again, that main idea is still leading us to finish this project in that manner, to have the information, accurate information, for every lost life during the war and to remember them: to create that collective memory which is based on the facts. I hope that this project will somehow prevent the future conflicts.

(11:46) We have already, with this project, succeeded to prevent the manipulation with numbers. So everyone now is accepting of those facts that we have collected, within more than 16 years, with our work in the field and collecting other documentation. And I think that for the future generation it will be more important actually because they will be able to understand the nature of conflict in Kosovo and to see, actually, who are the victims. In which way did they lost their lives? Where? When they disappeared? Where they found their bodies - mass graves and so on? I think this project is a huge contribution also for the peace in the future because no one - no human being - can neglect those facts. From which part those human beings are? So Serbs accept those facts. So Albanian accept those facts. And I think that this will be a kind of first step towards a kind of peaceful future: reconciliation maybe.

(13:28) Our experience shows us that, mainly, victims are eager to share their stories. And the only condition for them is to understand them and accept them as the victims. If they realise that you are going to listen to them by heart then they will share their stories. Of course, most of perpetrators are not happy to share their stories and they are not... most of them will never speak about what they did, what they witnessed during their actions. But when it comes to the victims, I'm convinced that most of them would share their stories. Those who are not ready to share their stories, it means that they didn't have enough attention by society and by institutions in general.

(14:24) If we speak about Kosovo 16 years after the war, the family of victims has lost their faith to their institutions but also to the society. They feel alone. They feel left alone, abandoned, because nobody's caring about them. They - most of them - didn't realise their right to justice, to choose, to reparation, so maybe some of them would not share any more stories because they are fed up with the ignorance of society and the institutions.

(15:11) We have seen different cases of war crime trials where witnesses, even injured parties - so those who survived some crimes - are afraid to speak, to give the testimonies for the court, because of revenge of accused persons. So in those cases I think that some of the survivors of different crimes do not feel safe to tell their stories: to share their stories. And unfortunately, this is the situation in Kosovo but again, I think that society, and particular institutions, can influence in this topic. If there are proper measures to protect witnesses the situation would be different.