

Testimony of Pam Dawes, collected by Anna Di Lellio
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There were five guys in the pub, they would call themselves “bad Catholics,” they were just sitting together and watching the news of the exodus on the TV screen and they thought, “What do we do? Have another drink or do something else?” They decided to do something else. They led a humanitarian convoy project, 15 or 16 lorries went out three weeks later, not to Kosovo, but to Albania, to the refugee camps.

It was Good Friday when they were in the pub. It was Easter time. I have so much respect for them. Most of those guys were Manchester United ticket holders and that was our best season, the team was ready to win the treble of trophies - three major tournaments – and the guys started to go to church halls rather than football matches. It completely took over their lives and those who had jobs came to work on the project at night.

I wasn't one of those guys in the pub, I joined them in week two. It moved so quickly, the convoy had so much aid, that the army came to help us. I was doing another job, I was blagging, which means getting stuff for nothing. And I contacted the army and said that we needed help. They said, “We will not come in uniforms, but we will come at night,” because we were a charity and should not be linked to the army. But the army helped load the lorries.

It could have ended as a humanitarian response, but refugees were evacuated to the North West of the UK, I think they were 2400, and many had people with special needs in their family, some were wounded, some very ill, with leukemia, and needed to go straight to the hospital. There were many children among them, many were seriously injured, some had survived a massacre, had been shot many times. Manchester Aid to Kosovo took a new focus, to support them in our community.

We got to know the families well and years later we started being affected by the success of their recovery. When those children turned thirty, the picture was of really good lives in the UK, and some people returned to Kosovo.

I was interested in the interview with Riza Krasniqi, which I read in the Kosovo Oral History website, because I have always been interested in Anton Çetta. I read what he said about blood feuds reconciliation, the liberation of Kosovo, and the love that the youth has for Kosovo: without this latter, the first and the second would be without purpose, the country would die anyway. I was moved by how much the youth loved Kosovo when they visited Kosovo from Manchester, and how much pleasure the visit gave them and they returned to Kosovo and took their skills, their good education, and to some extent money, back to Kosovo.

The idea of oral history came much later. In fact, it was something I heard on the BBC Radio 4 while driving. There was this Heritage Lottery Fund, partly funded by the Lottery but very much a government-led initiative, saying that oral history many not be what everyone imagines, it could be recent history, it could be the history of an organization, a group, a community. Bells started ringing. We could find support and record the experience of Kosovars in Manchester, the important history of the compassionate response by the city to a humanitarian crisis.

It was all the more important as things became harsh over here, with the growth of anti-immigration groups. It is was very important to tell the story of how the government and the local leadership had worked together on a refugee crisis and yes, the number had been small, but we could show that if the needs are met and resources are spent, the recovery, the rehabilitation and the contribution given back by refugees to the society are fantastic.

It was a positive story of our country and I went to the Heritage Lottery Fund to tell them that I wanted to tell the story of MaK and record the response of Manchester, and they said, "Go for it," and after two years planning they tripled the money we had initially requested. It was a very positive response, especially because the government was in a funding position. We had fantastic support, they gave us great advice, they hooked us up with a specialist who was able to guide us through the project, a member of the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Center, named after a Bandladeshi boy murdered in a race crime in Manchester school playground.

In the beginning, we organized an exhibition of our oral history project at the People's History Museum. We decided to add "Surgeon in the British army" to the interview with Col. David Vassallo, and once we did that we did it for everybody, and it was an important step. We presented the occupation and status of every single person, and that affected the Kosovars who came to see it. They said, "Yes, we are this, he is a film editor, he is a director, and that is a MaK leader."

When people saw that they were treated with a lot of dignity, they wanted to participate and the project grew. Many people came, they wanted to be involved, especially some of the young ones who were educated here, they said they wanted to use the recorders themselves, they started writing, they started recording the family around the table, and that was something, they got an appetite for recording history this way.

I knew that for many of the Kosovars who were doing the recording it was very difficult because we were talking about the past. They did not want to say no to us, they could see the value of the project but felt apprehensive about it. They said they would let me interview them. I have ben involved in the charity for 17 years and I have also been

involved in war crimes trials, where I gave victims support. They knew they did not have to explain everything to me.

I have been influenced by the documentary on the Holocaust Lanzmann's Shoah, where a very particular method was used to get details in an interview. Sometimes the interviewers give a lot of freedom to the subject and that is great, but I felt that factual information had to be obtained from young people who were maybe twelve or so in the war, and young people had very precise recollections of their villages, of what happened. I started to ask more questions than people normally do in oral history, we were all new to this, but I felt we needed a record of exactly what happened. I wanted it to be part of our project. We needed several recordings that were a historical record in that sense.

I learned and other people learned more of what happened in the ethnic cleansing, what people who were affected by it went through, having to move from house to house, to hide, often aware of the threat their parents were under, their parents were taken away... more detailed accounts broadened my understanding of what exactly it's like to be the subject of ethnic cleansing.

We have these serious portraits in black and white with the recordings but we also have photographs in color. Besim Kadriu was terribly wounded and had his face reconstructed in Manchester. When you see him with his wife and four girls in color, a beautiful family, it is so uplifting. People evacuated here find the section "Friends and Family" so encouraging, it is uplifting.

The oral history exhibition at the People's History Museum could have ended in a few months, but we decided to make it mobile and multiuse. The idea is to send it to other places, for example schools and workplaces. It is an exhibition that carries oral history to different environments, it can travel abroad, we might take it to Kosovo. We were invited to a field hospital, it was very interesting for the military to see it, a lot of recovery was due to KFOR and this is a very positive story for the British Army, which was interested in showing it to people who were going to serve somewhere else.

We have another project, a successful textile project. It is influenced by work done by Jehona Bogujevci, Saranda's cousin, using a bird as a symbol of freedom, embroidered by women's groups with texts from oral history. They are 3-D birds, embroidered so beautifully by women who never earned any money in their lives. They made 240 birds, but now they are embroidering what they want to say. They asked, "Can we embroider that we got on the tractor and they took the men away?" And we said, "Yes." So now it has become their project. We got some funding to develop that for a festival perhaps next year.

Other people have shown interest in the textile project, a psychiatric unit would like to use it as a form of therapy, so this is going to be a project that will grow and the artist Chloe Hamill will make something very powerful visually. It began with a poem written by children in Manchester after being evacuated, then we had some early oral history, now the women's own words. And they are not all about sorrow and struggle, sometimes they say, "flower rainbow, butterfly, peace-park," and this is very lovely for us, they are writing things not connected with the war and refugees. This is just the beginning.