

Remembering Srebrenica Transcript

[Text: This video was recorded in January 2021 as part of an event marking Holocaust Memorial Day.]

[Image: Map of Europe with Bosnia marked in red.]

[Smajo Beso] To offer a bit of context, that's Bosnia in red down there and that is the UK. My family came to England in July 1994 as refugees, we left everyone and everything behind. As you will see through out my talk it was one of many occasions when we had to make a quick decision not fully knowing what impact those decisions would have on us, but we had to simply make them to survive.

[Image: Picture of a small town in valley from a hillside. Picture of mountains with a path through grass in the foreground. A black and white picture of a German soldier holding a gun, watching a two trucks approach.]

[Smajo Beso] I was born in a little town called Stolac in southern Bosnia, it is a beautiful part of the country with a lot of incredible architecture, beautiful landscapes and Bosnia was very much a normal modern European country and we had everything that we have here, cinemas, theatres, museums, libraries.

[Image: A black and white image of a person sitting on the floor in a tunnel with their head in their hands. A black and white image of a destroyed building. A black and white image of two women with their hands in the air, with a German soldier standing next to them. An image of a candle burning.]

[Smajo Beso] It was a year before I was born Bosnia hosted the Winter Olympics in 1984, and some of you watching this might remember Torvill and Dean becoming the highest scoring figure skaters of all time. In 1991 my parents were in their thirties, about my age now, we had just moved into our new home, which they had designed and built and childhood was just amazing.

[Image: A black and white image of a person lying on the floor in a tunnel reaching out to another person who is standing. Both people are illumined by the light at the end of the tunnel. A picture of five children and a young adult all standing outside smiling at the camera.]

[Smajo Beso] In Bosnia we weren't raised to differentiate between Muslims or Christians, or to identify people along ethnic or religious lines. I am the one there being held by one of my Cousins, and the one with blonde hair just there.

In my family we still had Muslims, we had Christians and Atheists of course. The only difference between us kids was which cartoon we liked, books we liked to read, which football club we supported. I just know at certain times of the year we would visit our friends at Christmas and buy presents for each other, and then they would do the same for us.

There came a time when things appeared as they changed quickly and when none of that mattered anymore. Bosnia became the scene of the biggest atrocities on European soil, just fifty years on from the Holocaust.

[Images: Picture of a woman wearing a headscarf in a graveyard. Black and white picture of a destroyed building.]

[Smajo Beso] In three and a half years of destruction more than a hundred thousand people were killed, more than two million people displaced, or became refugees and between twenty and eighty thousand young girls and women were raped. There are still more than seven thousand missing persons in Bosnia today.

[Images: Black and white picture of three children on a wall. One is sitting on the wall the others are standing on the wall. Picture of a bridge over a river with a historical building in the background. Picture of a pile of books on fire.]

[Smajo Beso] And it wasn't just people that were targeted. Proof of this existence, proof of a shared and multicultural Bosnia was targeted. So, museums, archives, libraries, books, more than two million books and journals were destroyed in the national library alone.

[Images: Black and white picture of a war torn village with badly damaged buildings. In the foreground of the picture is a sign saying, "Don't Forget". A black and white picture of a group of civilians being marched by German soldiers in World War. A black and white picture of two women with their hands in the air, with a German soldier standing next to them. A picture of a star used to identify Jewish people.]

[Smajo Beso] Although this seemed like it happened overnight, it wasn't the case, this is what happens when a whole group of people is persuaded into thinking that another group of people didn't belong anymore. In a very similar way to how many Germans were persuaded that Jewish people and other groups didn't belong in Germany anymore during the Second World War.

[Images: Black and white picture of a buildings that have been badly damaged by war. Black and white picture of a building which has been badly damaged by war, a white van and people are on the street in front of it. Black and white picture of a town which has been badly damaged by war. In the foreground there is a sign that says, "Don't Forget". Black and white picture of a man and a woman standing next to a wall looking at buildings that have been badly damaged by war. Black and white picture of three children.]

[Smajo Beso] You expect genocide, mass murder and rape to be perpetuated by strangers and by monsters, you don't expect normal people to be able to do these things. You imagine unknown soldiers coming into town, maybe speaking a foreign language, wearing a uniform covered in familiar symbols and flags of foreign countries. It is easier to imagine that, than to imagine your next door neighbour, your friend, your classmate, your teacher suddenly wanting to kill you just because of who you happen to be. But that is exactly what happened in Bosnia, neighbour turned on neighbour, friend turned on friend and even in some cases family turned on family, just because of our faith.

[Images: Black and white picture of a street which has been badly damaged by war. Black and white picture of a building which has been badly damaged by war. Black and white picture of two blocks of flats which has been badly damaged by war. Black and white picture of a brick building with a tower in the background. Holocaust Memorial Day 27/1 logo]

[Smajo Beso] The majority of these perpetrators before the war were good honest ordinary people, but somehow they accepted this ideology that a whole group of people. In reality genocide does not happen overnight, for about ten years leading up to the war there was a steady rise in casual racism, hate crime, nationalist parties started coming to power. In 1986, just two years on from the Olympics Slobodan Milošević a Serbian politician came to power, and by 1991 politicians were openly equating Bosnian Muslims to disease and vermin. And again, very similar to what we saw during the Holocaust.

[Text: "It was genetically deformed material that embraced Islam. And now, of course, with each successive generation it simply becomes concentrated. It gets worse and worse, it simply expresses itself and dictates their style of thinking, which is rooted in their genes. And through the centuries, the genes degraded further." Biljana Plasvic, former President of Republika Srpska.]

[Smajo Beso] So there comes a point where ridding Muslims, the disease, the idea of killing another human being it not only becomes morally acceptable, it becomes a moral imperative to kill and torture all day, because what are you doing when you are ridding disease out of society. You are doing society a service. Genocide is never an individual act because it involves and it requires the support of the entire society, and I don't mean that we should hold everybody equally responsible, I mean it includes and requires the support of all elements of society, so from the media, religious communities, the academics, the politicians and of course all of us.

[Image: Picture of three children standing outside in the sunshine.]

[Smajo Beso] In 1991 I was six years old my parents, as I said, had just moved into our new home, that they had spent a lot of time building and working on. My Dad worked in a local factory, my Mam looked after me, my brother and sister. I am the one on the right there, with the red and white shorts, and that is my cousin in the middle and my brother far left.

So, I was old enough to see things changing around me but I didn't fully understand what was happening, at that age you are too busy playing and being a child, but I still picked up bits that my parents, and the other adults were discussing around me. I knew something was happening.

One day I remember running into the house and seeing my Mam in front of the TV crying. She tried to hide her tears but I could see she was upset as a child you just sense the emotions that your parents face. I remember she hugged me, she kissed me like she always did and said it was nothing, just go outside and play, and again being a child you listen to your parents, easily distracted I went outside and played, and it was only years later that I realised that my Man was watching TV and she was watching war spreading out across Bosnia and she knew that it was getting closer to us and she was completely helpless.

[Images: A picture of a tank. A picture of the side of a building with bullet holes in the cement. A picture of a destroyed building. A close of picture of bullet holes in a building.]

[Smajo Beso] There was nothing to do, there was nothing to do to help us and that as a parent I can imagine must have been the worst feeling. Gradually we started hearing explosions and shooting in the distance, it was getting closer and closer to us.

[Images: A black and white picture of buildings destroyed by war. A picture taken from a destroyed building looking out over the landscape of a town.]

[Smajo Beso] Until one day, it was spring 1992, our town was surrounded by the Yugoslav National Army, or the Serbian Army, and at first soldiers were coming over for coffee and tea, these were friends, these were people my parents knew and grew up with but then things quickly changed.

[Images: A picture of hands reaching over a barbed wire topped fence. A black and white picture of buildings destroyed by war. Picture of three children standing outside in the sunshine. Picture of a destroyed building.]

[Smajo Beso] We started hearing rumours of concentration camps, torture, rape, and killings and one day a soldier, a friend who had been over literally every single day for tea and coffee, he came over, and I ran up to him like I did every single day. And he just pushed me away and he was ranting

about Muslims doing something, somewhere, I just remember thinking what has this got to do with me? I haven't done anything; he got his knife out and he started sharpening it and he said that today was a good day for cutting throats.

[Images: Black and white picture of a building which has been badly damaged by war, a white van and people are on the street in front of it. Black and white picture of a town which has been badly damaged by war. In the foreground there is a sign that says, "Don't Forget". Holocaust Memorial Day 27/1 logo.]

[Smajo Beso] We were lucky that another Serbian friend, a soldier, was nearby and he came and saved us. We had a lot of incredible friends who risked their own lives at this time to bring us food and medicine and helped us on occasions like this, but I wonder how many people would have the courage now to risk their own lives to help their friends in this way.

[Images: A shot taken looking out from a destroyed wall in a building toward a town. Black and white picture of a man and a woman standing next to a wall looking at buildings that have been badly damaged by war. Black and white picture of three children. Two of the children are standing on the wall, while the third is sitting on it.]

[Smajo Beso] The first few months of war were probably the most difficult, the shock, the realisation that it is actually happening. Before the war, the concept of war, bombs and people being killed and people starving, people fleeing their homes as refugees. I think for many of us it still is something that we just see on TV, in films, on the news, read about in history books it is something that happens somewhere else, to someone else, and I don't think that anyone truly believes that it can ever really happen to them. But I think that is the biggest delusion thinking that somehow we are different and that it can't happen to us.

[Images: Picture of six children. Black and white picture of a street which has been badly damaged by war. Holocaust Memorial Day 27/1 logo.]

[Smajo Beso] And imagine all the things that we take for granted now, they were gone overnight. Not being able to sleep at night because of constant gunfire and explosions, and screams, and cries. The shock of not having food, water, electricity all of those things were gone.

[Image: Black and white picture of a building which has been badly damaged by war. Black and white picture of two blocks of flats which has been badly damaged by war.]

[Smajo Beso] In the first nine months of war we had to flee more than fourteen times, each time not really knowing where we were going or what we would find, but it was a simple decision, stay and be killed or we move.

[Image: Bullet holes in the cement of a building's wall. Black and white picture of a brick building with a tower in the background. Picture of three children standing outside in the sunshine.]

[Smajo Beso] We became the people that we saw on TV, the people that we thought were so different from us. My Dad, and my Uncles, and my Cousins joined the army and became soldiers, and I said my Dad worked in a factory before the war, he certainly was not a soldier but they joined the local army to fight alongside their Croatian friends and neighbours, to fight against the Serbs that were occupying Bosnia at the time.

[Image: Portrait pictures of Smajo, his brother and his sister. Picture of six children. Holocaust Memorial Day 27/1 logo.]

[Smajo Beso] We kids, you know, tried to get on with our lives the best we could, we tried hardest to observe normality, friendships. Old games were replaced with games of war with shooting and tanks and grenades. Maybe some of you watching this collect objects or books, or football tops, well me and my brothers started collecting bullets and pieces of shrapnel, that was our childhood.

[Image: Portrait pictures of Smajo, his brother and his sister.]

[Smajo Beso] But again, things started changing, so about a year into the war, Muslims again, or Bosnian Muslims started becoming the scapegoat so all Muslims were to be photographed and recorded. This is me far left, my sister in the middle and my brother far right.

A few days later after this I was playing with my friends and we saw trucks leaving town and we ran to the road excited really not understanding what was happening and one of my friends spotted his Uncles and we are all waving excitedly. My sister spotted my Dad and were waving so excited. We run home to tell our Man what we had seen and just by her reaction we knew it wasn't something good. Later on, we found out that all of the men were captured and taken away somewhere and we didn't really know where.

So, on the first of July 1993 Croats started gathering all Bosnian Muslim men, the oldest was ninety and the youngest was just thirteen, so not all of fighting age. Local schools and hospitals and factories were set up as places of torture and rape and concentration camps and they were just gone, and we didn't know as I said where they were taken whether they were dead or alive.

We were staying with my Uncle at the time, and the next day they came to take him and I still remember my sister screaming at the top of her lungs you have taken my Dad please don't take my Uncle she just kept repeating it over and over again. We were holding onto him, but, you know they took him away.

My, so most of my male relatives were gone, only women and children behind, two of my cousins were just sixteen, another cousin was seventeen and he was taken to a local hospital which was set up as a torture chamber where he went through some of the most awful things and the, the beatings and awful, awful things and this was done to him by his neighbours, you know, his parents friends.

Women and children remained behind for more than a month. As I said we thought they were all killed, we heard awful rumours, we had Croatian soldiers who would just come to our house every single day threatening to kill and rape everybody. One day a man came with a huge sword, like a massive samurai sword saying he was going to chop all of our heads off.

Our friends and neighbours forgot us overnight. The only sympathy that we got on that month was from animals. Just before the war started, when we had moved into our new home my parents bought us a dog named, we named him Lassie, he as a German Shepperd and he was very protective of us so, when he would start howling we knew we had to run. He could always just sense shelling was going to start or something bad would happen, so it was great having him around, especially when my Dad was taken away.

By August of 1993, so a month after my Dad was taken away Lassie wasn't eating at all he was just burying all of the food that we were giving him. We knew that something was happening. My Mam packed our bags and Lassie was right, on the fourth of August 1993 Croatian soldiers came and forced all of us out of our homes and forced us to march to a local factory where my Dad had just worked, just before the war.

And we had to make a quick decision about what to do with Lassie, he was part of our family and we were begging my Mam to take him with us, but really we knew that this point, German Sheppard's are big dogs and we knew at this point, you know, that being so protective of us he could attack someone. We begged my Mam, and she thought she was doing the best thing, so she tied him behind a house, away from the house, she left food for him thinking no one would hurt a dog, why would anyone hurt an animal, and as we were walking away we saw those houses were already been looted, you know, we saw houses on fire and we heard two gun shots, and our neighbours had shot Lassie trying to get into our home.

As I had said some houses were already on fire as were libraries, museums, the local Mosque which was about five hundred years old was blown up and the foundations dug up. Local hospitals and factories, I as I said, were set up as places of torture so by the time we arrived at the factory, which I knew well, because that is where my Dad had worked, there was hundreds of people there already and people crying and panicking. And I remember my Mam holding onto me so hard, I remember my hand actually hurting because she was so worried about losing us in the crowd. We saw some young girls and women being singled out, and we were all taken into one of the office buildings, and each family was searched and my Mam was forced to sign this document to say that she was giving everything up for safe keeping.

[Image: Document signed by Smajo's Mother.]

[Smajo Beso] So, just a few months ago while doing research at Newcastle University, I actually found that very document, and my Mam is number thirteen on the list, and you can see that's her signature there. And it says that my Mam signed over two pairs of earrings and her wedding ring for safe keeping, and when I showed this to my Mam, she broke down in tears, as it was a physical proof of our experience. This document is priceless for me as of research and for my family but documents like this don't tell us the reality of what happened that day.

We are so used to seeing news reports, statistics and numbers, dramatic footage about war, about refugees and migrants and asylum seekers but sometimes we forget that behind every statistic, behind every label, behind every document there is a human being and there is a human experience.

This document doesn't tell us that those items were not handed over for safe keeping but they were taken from us, they have never been returned. The ring and the earrings were not the only items taken. It doesn't tell us how the whole ordeal lasted more than forty-five minutes or us being searched. It doesn't tell us that the earrings were taken from my little sister and they had been given to her by my Grandad, just before he passed away. It doesn't tell us how my sister begged and cried but they, but they took those earrings anyway. It doesn't tell us how I was bribed with chocolate, one of the soldiers kept saying if you tell us where you Mam has hidden the money I will buy you a massive chocolate bar, and I remember looking up and I could see a reflection of myself crying in his sunglasses.

It doesn't tell us how my Mam knew one of the soldiers, and she knew that he had a family of his own, and she explained to him that we had been refugees and he knew all of this already for over a year. It doesn't tell us anything about how, then one of the soldiers started searching my Mam and grabbing her. It doesn't tell us how scared I was and how scared we all were and when we started crying they just took that as a sign that we had something to hide.

These soldiers didn't see a friend anymore, they didn't see a mother with kids, they didn't see the humanity of us we were reduced to a statistic, to a piece of gold, to a signature, and that is exactly when dehumanisation leads to.

We were loaded onto cattle trucks; we didn't know where we were going and we thought we all would be killed. Again, we waited on the trucks for about an hour before we started moving. And Bosnia in August is incredibly hot, literally people on top of each other, you have three jumpers on, two jackets because we were not allowed to carry many things.

There was a little baby crying and the baby fainted, and the mother seeing this the mother fainted. We had one bottle of water and my Mam used it on their faces and because it was so incredibly hot. I fainted as well and I just remember, kind of, hazily remembering the rest of the journey.

[Image: Mostar destruction between 1992 and 1995.]

[Smajo Beso] After a long journey on these cattle trucks we were dropped off near Bosnian government controlled territory and forced, marched the rest of the way. We didn't really know where we were going or what we would find we were completely cut off by this point. As we marched there was hundreds of people panicking, crying, belongings scattered across the road, there was elderly unable to walk anymore, sitting by the side of the road literally just crying.

At one point I stepped over something and thought it was a pile of clothes and a foam mattress, but as I stepped over it I felt something different I felt something hard underneath my feet, and as the foam mattress kind of slipped off I saw that was the body of an old man. And at that moment I just remember thinking about my Grandad because I knew that he was somewhere here in this crowd. I just kept thinking has he managed just to keep walking has he managed just to get through this.

[Image: Stari Most destroyed on 9 November 1993 by Bosnian-Croat forces.]

[Smajo Beso] After, after moving for several weeks and living in ruins at times, we eventually settled in a town called Mostar. And Mostar was famous for its old bridge, that I has as a screen saver right at the start, and Mostar was surrounded by the Serbian army on one side and the Croatian army on the other side, and you had this high concentration of people in the middle, shelled and bombed daily without food and water and electricity, and if they are not killed bay all of this then they will die of starvation and disease.

[Image: Stari Most destroyed on 9 November 1993 by Bosnian-Croat forces.]

[Video Clip: Clip showing the damage to the city of Mostar.]

[Smajo Beso] And the bridge, and that whole area, I think eighty percent of the city centre was completely destroyed, now I have got a quick video that I will try and play now just to show you a bit of the scale of the destruction, and you can see the kind of the living conditions we had at the time. And this is the area around the old bridge that I showed you at the start so you can see that everything is completely destroyed and just on the left that's where the bridge, that's where the bridge is.

[Image: Picture of Aunt Emina.]

Life was incredibly difficult but we were lucky because we at least had my Aunty there, my Mam's sister my Aunty Emina, and we managed to find her and we were staying there with my Uncle and her two kids, and my Grandparents who has come just a few days before us. And she was always my favourite Aunty, she always had a smile on her face, she always joking around, she had this deep long wavy hair and she was thirty-eight, just three years older than me now. So, it was at least a bit of, a bit of security, a bit of normality being there with her and although we were living in such conditions, her, and my Mam they were always so creative with how they managed to keep us going.

Some days we would eat once, most days we would not eat anything. We fell asleep hungry every single night, but we were alive that was the most important thing. But as I said they were so creative and always managed to put food on the table for us. So, they used chicken feed to make bread. They used grass to make pies and the chicken feed was mixed with some other white chemical powder and we weren't sure what it was but we needed it to make bread. Eventually we stopped using it because whatever that powder was our skins started peeling off. I remember my brother taking off his jeans one day and literally the skin off his legs just literally fell off. But kids are kids, apart from the boredom we somehow got on. We didn't ask for food because we knew we didn't have any.

[Images: Picture of Smajo's Dad. Pictures of Red Cross Documentation.]

[Smajo Beso] In November 1993 we heard that my Dad was alive, we heard that he was in a concentration camp and we heard that five hundred inmates in the worst condition, those that were beaten and tortured were to be released to an island off Croatia. So, we found out that my Dad was taken to a camp called Goli Otok it was a camp run by the Croatian army. And my Dad lost twenty six kilograms in the first few weeks, so that is about four stone and we went through the most inhumane torture and beating on a daily basis, so very little food, no medical help or treatment, and not everyone there was healthy, or was, you know, there was kids there as well.

My Dad was then brought to the UK by the British Red Cross in collaboration with the British government he was promised if he left and he didn't go back to Bosnia that we would be joining him immediately. When that didn't happen my Dad actually requested, and this is the letter that he wrote, he requested to be sent back to Bosnia because back in Mostar, you know, things were still difficult.

[Image: Letter that Smajo's Dad wrote requesting return to Bosnia.]

[Smajo Beso] We started night school as a way of resisting, as an act of defiance, because we were desperately trying to hold onto our values, our culture, our identity, and we loved school because that was the only normal bit of normality that we have. And around this time we started receiving letters from my Dad actually through the Red Cross, and I was so desperate to read and write, because I had missed so much school already, and this bit at the bottom here, and I have still got this letter, that is the first time that my Dad had actually seen my handwriting.

[Image: Letter featuring Smajo's handwriting.]

[Smajo Beso] So, in January 1994, shelling was more frequent and intense than ever before thousands and thousands of shells were falling on Mostar daily, and for whatever reason our house, our Aunties house was being targeted even more. So, we could see a Croatian tank come out and target the city and we had nowhere to hide we would just go to the back room, and, or hold onto each other and pray that one of the shells would not come through. And on one occasion our house was hit by six tank shells, literally our whole house was shaking and you feel like it is going to collapse any minute.

Our last night of school was on the twenty third of January 1994, and that night Croatians used their plane to drop bombs onto Mostar. Through our classroom window I could see our street, our neighbourhood up in flames. There was so much panic and screaming but I was just frozen in shock. I don't remember crying or screaming at all, I just kept looking up at our house.

[Image: Picture of Aunt Emina.]

[Smajo Beso] Back at my house, or back at my Aunties house my Aunty Emina was wounded. My Grandparents, my two Cousins, my Aunties two sons and my Sister carried her out of the house on a blanket. Neighbours rushed out to help, they managed to get her into a car but petrol was almost impossible to come by, they pushed and pushed and managed to get to the main road, where they managed to get her into another car and this all while being, you know, bombed and shelled, and it's pitch black and the car drove frantically in the dark and that car ran out of petrol as well and they had to push, and they pushed and they managed to get her to a hospital.

It was a make shift hospital, it didn't have any modern equipment or medicine but at least it had doctors and, one of my Mam's first Cousin actually, was a doctor there and he was one of the doctors that was treating her and they tried very hard to save her life, but she had lost so much blood and unfortunately the next morning at four o'clock in the morning she passed away.

The easiest thing for my Mam, the most soothing thing to do in that moment, she has just lost her sister, her kids are starving, she hasn't seen her husband, or brother and most of her other male relatives for months. The easiest and the most soothing thing in that moment would have been to tell us to direct our anger at all Croatians and to say that all Croats and all Croatians are exactly the same, they are all responsible. But she realised what impact this would have on us, she sat me, my brother and sister down on the very day that she lost her sister and carefully explained that we can't live our life in anger and hate. She explained that there are good and bad people out there and the best way to resist those that are trying to kill us, and they were killing us was not to become hateful and angry like them.

A few months later on the nineteenth of June 1994 the British Red Cross came to take us across to England. We had less than two hours to get ready and my Mam had to make a quick decision. We wanted to be with my Dad, of course, but it meant leaving everyone and everything behind again, leaving my Grandparents that were so reliant on my Mam.

[Images: Smajo, his Sister and their Grandparents. Smajo with other children at the refugee camp.]

[Smajo Beso] The journey to Newcastle took more than a month, we spent a month in a refugee camp in Croatia, and that's me there with the blue shorts and there is my brother and sister and some of my friends there. And coming to the UK was absolutely amazing, seeing my Dad for the first time in over a year, we had both changed so much, I had blonde hair before I came to the UK and I have got hair like this. First night in England I woke up screaming I was having nightmares.

[Image: Smajo with his Dad and Brother outside the front door of a house.]

[Smajo Beso] My parents had an opportunity to leave Bosnia early on in the war but they decided to stay because no one really want to leave their home. So, my Dad came to the UK on the nineteenth of January 1994, we left Bosnia on the nineteenth of June 1994 and we arrived in Newcastle on the nineteenth of July 1994. The number nineteen is our lucky number.

So, I was nine years old at the time and I started school in year five, not knowing a word of English, and my teacher was amazing but I couldn't understand anything that she was saying, nor anyone else for that matter. And she had this thing that, at the end of each day she would sit down, we would all sit around her, she would play the guitar and we would sing this song about having a great day at school with our friends and so on. She would sing her part and then say someone's name and they would become part of the song, so the next part of the song you would sing with that person's name and they would get to go home first and everyone loved this part of the day.

But I hated it, when everyone is encouraging me to sing and I am thinking “not this again” and then she start playing the guitar and they all started singing this song in Bosnian, so when I was out learning English separately she went through all this effort to teach her class to, to remember this song, and sing this song in Bosnian and that was absolutely incredible. That was literally the first day I went home with a smile on my face, I felt I was home.

For me it was easy I was young, my sister was fifteen and she worked hard, she went to college, after college she started working with refugees and vulnerable people and she still does this today.

My brother was eleven he went onto to study Biomedical science at Newcastle University. He got a first, after that he went on to study medicine he graduated and now works as a doctor here in Newcastle. And I think our lives could have been very different had my Mam dealt with her Sisters death in a different way, or if I, or if we all didn't have these amazing teachers to help us at the time.

And my parents have always valued what this county has provided for them and have always wanted to make a positive contribution. And when we have had the support that we have had from the people in the North East, because if it wasn't for the amazing people of the North East we wouldn't be here, I think our lives would be very different.

[Image: Newspaper clipping with a picture of Smajo's brother.]

[Smajo Beso] And that, that was my brother he was in the local newspaper when he got his GCSE's. But as I said if we didn't have the support we have had our lives would have been very, very different and these tiny, small acts of kindness can have the biggest impact on a people's life.

[image: Smajo with his Mam, Dad, Brother, and Sister in a park in Newcastle.]

[Smajo Beso] And I always like to end my presentation by asking people what they think, or to think about what peace means, war is far easier to define, but I think peace can be something a lot more difficult, and for me the little acts of kindness, kindness, my teacher, teaching her whole class to sing the song in Bosnian, to me that is peace, that is peace building.

So, I realise I have gone over my time now so thank you for listening and if you have any questions I would be more than happy to answer them.

[Text: Thank You.]

[Emily] Hello, I am Emily from Belmont Community School. What is the situation like in Bosnia now?

[Smajo Beso] So, Bosnia today has, it has gone a long way to rebuild and recover from the war, so we have had more than twenty five years of peace but the situation, and, and, and Bosnia is a beautiful country and I recommend any one if they do get the opportunity to visit.

But there is still tension in parts of Bosnia because we haven't really had peace in the sense that the vast majority of perpetrators of war crimes are still walking free in the same communities that they terrorised.

So, in my home town the vast majority of people that, you know, rounded up my Dad, tortured and killed people, that did these awful things are still living freely in those communities. And further, the more you have war criminals, even war criminals that have been convicted by international courts, they are being openly celebrated, there are monuments, there are public squares and streets named after them, but as I said that is just in parts of Bosnia and the situation can be very, very difficult.

But it's still, you know, it's a safe, modern European country, it has a lot to offer and there is a lot we can learn from what happened in Bosnia, which is what my work focusses on. As I said if you ever do get the opportunity to visit I strongly recommend it.

[Issac] Hi I am Issac from Belmont Community School; I would like to ask a question. Do you still have family in Bosnia and if so are they okay and how are they?

[Smajo Beso] Sadly, most of my family is scattered across the world so we came to the UK. I have got family in America, Australia, Germany, Austria, literally everywhere. So, as I said in my talk the war displaced more than two million people and we came to the UK as part of an agreement between the British government and the Croatian governments. So, for Croatia it was very important that once my Dad was released from the prison camp he didn't go back to Bosnia because they then feared that he would become a soldier. So, the international community signed this agreement and the UK was part of that agreement and my Dad was taken out, so he could pretty much choose to go anywhere in the world apart from the Middle East and Africa and Bosnia.

So, my Dad choose the UK and he was told he would only be here for two years and now we have been here for, well, twenty six years and the UK is our home, so we do have family across the world, but we also do have a lot of family in Bosnia.

As I said in many parts they are fine and they are safe, but we do have family members, as I have said that are still living surrounded by the people that committed these awful things. And I in the talk mentioned my seventeen year old Cousin who was tortured by his neighbours and he has returned to that home and his family has rebuilt that home and they still live amongst those same neighbours that did those most awful, awful things to him.

So, life can be incredibly difficult in Bosnia, but I always use Bosnians as an example because it is not just my mother who made these great efforts and had this incredible courage to teach us not to hate, not to generalise. I would say that has happened across Bosnia, because once you lose that many family members, once you lose everything you realise what hate and anger can do, so in that sense Bosnia is really an example of what can be achieved in terms of peace building.

[Jessica] Hi, I am Jessica from Belmont Community School. Since leaving Bosnia, what are you most proud of achieving?

[Smajo Beso] What am I most proud of achieving? I think that is always a difficult question and if I go back to the point where my Aunty was killed and for my Mam and my Aunty and Grandparents it was always very important for them to hold onto our values, to hold onto what mattered to us, and I always make the point my Mam in that moment did the most difficult thing, the most courageous thing to reject hate because it could have been so much easier for her, the most soothing thing just to tell us to direct our hate and anger at them.

But she was strong enough to help us imagine a better future and in that moment as a nine year old I am not sure whether I saw any good in the world, because we were shelled, you know killed, and starving and really you know it was my Mam and my Aunty, my Grandparents that constantly reminded us of that and my Mam always imagined that future when we would go to university.

So I went to Newcastle University and I studied architecture and I work at Newcastle University now, so not really my achievement but I am proud of the steps that my family has taken because that has had the biggest impact on my life and the work that I do sharing my story and educational work around Bosnia, while I wouldn't be doing it if it wasn't for my Mam and other family members that took those steps, to help us understand what was happening at that time.

[Owen] Hi am Owen from Belmont Community School So how hard was it to find work after leaving your country and what do you do now?

So, coming to the UK I think people sometimes think it is very easy to completely uproot and move to a new place and no matter how beautiful and amazing that new place is it is always incredible, because all of the things that ground you in life, your family, all the things that act as anchor points your job, your school, your family, your friends, they are gone, they are completely gone.

So, we were brought to the UK as part of this governments programme, but as part of that very short visa extensions, so the war was still going on in Bosnia, and it was incredibly difficult for my parents as they had the constant fear that we would be sent back to Bosnia anytime.

And in Newcastle there was about three hundred Bosnians, and many of those have gone elsewhere or during the nineties they decided to leave the region out of fear that they will be sent back. So, for my parents it was incredibly difficult because they were stuck between these two worlds, you know, they want to make a contribution here, they want to integrate, they want to work hard but they could be sent back any minute. So, I think that hindered, kind of, my parents' opportunities in the nineties because they always had that thought actually we are going to go back, we are going to be sent back to that war zone, we are going to be sent back to a home that was completely destroyed.

But for me I was nine, as I said for me it was the easiest, I think my brother and sister, especially my sister it was a lot harder for them, but for myself it was far easier because as a nine year old. As a child you quickly integrate, you start playing football, you make friends and I enjoyed school. I was always good at school so I went to Newcastle University I studied architecture there and after I, after I graduated I worked in Newcastle as an architect for several years and then in 2015 I started teaching at Newcastle University. So, I primary teach architecture but alongside that I do research on the war in Bosnia and all this work around Bosnian genocide and the kind of, lessons that we can learn from Bosnia and apply here to the UK.

[Sophie] Hi I am Sophie from Belmont Community School and my question is have you experienced any discrimination since arriving in Britain?

[Smajo Beso] This question about discrimination is always an interesting one, I think in any modern society, in any society in the world there is always going to be times when someone will experience some form of discrimination.

In all I think my family has been incredibly lucky that we have had the support that we have had from the people in the North East so one of the things that I didn't mention in my talk was when my Dad was brought to the UK, as I said, I think I did actually mention this, he was promised that he would be reunited with us immediately, so that is why he said okay, fine, I will agree to coming here.

And when that didn't happen my Dad and a few other men that were here, they went on hunger strike, and if it wasn't for the amazing people of the North East that got involved I would still be in Bosnia. And I always reference, because I still have this letter, so the MP of Newcastle at the time was Jim Cousins so he got involved and I have got letter he wrote to the British government, the Croatian government and the Bosnian government where he described, so there is a letter from April 1994 where he describes me, my Brother, my Sister, my Dad and my Mam as constituents, I mean if I am being honest in April of 1994 I was still in a war zone I don't even think I knew where Newcastle was, and to have someone describe us as constituents well that is absolutely incredible.

And then there was other people, there was this couple called Christina and John who lived close to where we were housed when we arrived in the nineties and they were just, they opened their home

to us and they had parties for the kids and dinners so, and that's just two examples. There were so many other positive examples of people helping us and we had some much incredible support, that, you know, my teacher, as I mentioned what she did, there was so many amazing, incredible things and I always like to focus on those positives stories, especially when I am talking about what happened in Bosnia.

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