

Interview with Besim Nela, Former War Zone Interpreter

Throughout the history of mankind, interpreters have been present when individuals, tribes, races, and nations have had to communicate across language barriers. Of all the different scenarios in which interpreters have to work, surely the war zone must be among the most challenging. Those who interpret in legal, medical, business, and community situations can only imagine what it must be like to work while bullets are flying, bombs are exploding, and people are dying. My guest this month, Besim Nela, has been there and done that.

Besim is originally from Kosovo, in southern Serbia, a landlocked area in the central Balkan Peninsula. Historically, the Balkans, in southeastern Europe, were on the trade routes between east and west, and have always been a crossroads where cultures, religions, ethnicities, and languages have been thrown together, not always with peaceful results. The region has been in a state of turmoil for generations. Since the end of World War II, it has been torn apart by armed uprisings and civil wars that have played havoc with national borders and resulted in the slaughter and displacement of hundreds of thousands of people.

In June 1999, NATO stationed a peacekeeping force in Kosovo. The British army was part of that Kosovo Force (KFOR), which was charged with establishing and maintaining security during the hostilities and humanitarian crises of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Besim worked as an interpreter with the British army in Kosovo for two years (1999–2001).

Besim, let's get a little background.

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in Lipjan, a city not far from Prishtina, in Kosovo.

According to your résumé, you speak English, Albanian, Bosnian, Macedonian, and Serbo-Croatian. Where and how did you learn these languages? Which one is your native language?

My native language is Albanian. I learned Serbo-Croatian in school as a second language. I learned Macedonian when



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I spent a year in Macedonia (south of Kosovo) in my very early teens. Bosnian is pretty similar to Serbian. When I came to the U.S., most of my friends here were Bosnians, so I was able to learn the language quite easily. I started learning English in elementary school and then took English as a second language (ESL) for about a year at Goodwin College in Connecticut, just after I arrived in the U.S. in April of 2002.

Did you go to college here, other than taking the ESL course at Goodwin?

Yes, I enrolled at Branford Hall Career Institute in Windsor, Connecticut, in mid-2003. I graduated in December 2005 as a health claims specialist.

What kind of work are you doing currently?

I'm a manager for a company called Novitex in Windsor, Connecticut. I work there at night, and during the day I interpret and translate in the Connecticut court system for an agency called Language Link.

When and where did you become an interpreter? What made you decide to do that?

I became an interpreter when NATO troops came to Kosovo in 1999. I needed a job and the pay was really good.

Did you become a translator at the same time?

No, I didn't start translating until 2015, here in the U.S. I took the translating and interpreting classes that the agency I work for provides. I also took online classes, but I also taught myself.

Tell us about your experience interpreting with the British army in Kosovo. Were you a soldier or a civilian working with the military?

I was 18 years old when I started working for the British army. The KFOR unit was stationed close to where I lived, which is why I signed up for work there. The army was looking for people who could speak English, and I was picked to help soldiers with language issues in the field. I was a civilian, but I became a contractor for the army when I got the job.

I was stationed at a camp called Elizabeth, which was in Lipjan. I stayed on the base in private quarters with the other interpreters when they needed me, but most of the time I lived at home because it was just a five-minute walk from the camp.

At first it was all about getting a job because work was difficult to find since the war had done so much damage to my country. But it didn't take long to realize the dangerous nature of the assignment. We were provided with a bulletproof vest and helmet, which we were required to wear at all times because of the risks involved.

I accompanied British soldiers into mine fields and interpreted for Serbians and civilians who had lost family members. Because I was very familiar with that part of the Balkans, I knew the traditions and understood the ethnic divisions. It was because of this knowledge that I was also used as a map reader.

At that time, my interpreting colleagues and I had just started to feel alive again after having lost everything in the war. We had an opportunity to work, make

a living, and help others as well. It felt great. It was the only job I've ever had where I couldn't wait to show up the next day. When they called for me, I ran to work even though it was dangerous.

Were you in a pool of interpreters who were called on randomly, or were you attached to a particular group of British army personnel with whom you worked on a regular basis?

It depended. Anyone from army personnel could call on us as needed, but most of the time we were assigned to a group of soldiers when they went on patrol or went to defuse landmines and bombs. After a year in the field I ended up interpreting for officers, generals, and peacemakers at meetings.

Tell us about a "normal" day in the life of an interpreter in that war zone. What sort of missions were you sent on? Were you in danger at any time?

On a normal day, I would go to work and joke around with the soldiers while waiting for my orders. We went out on patrol on foot or in cars. I was mostly assigned to places where landmines had been detected, and my job was to tell civilians to clear the area until the bomb or landmine had been defused and warn them to stay away from those areas at all times. I was also supposed to try to find out more information from civilians and interpret between them and the bomb squad specialists, who were called Gurkhas. I was working close to them. Yes, we were in constant danger.

Was it a "day job" in the sense that you went somewhere during the day, then returned to your base at night? Or were you sometimes gone for days at a time?

It was mainly a day job. We would go somewhere for a few hours, come back to have lunch, and then go out again. There were also times when we went to other cities for two or three days and then came back to base.

What sort of situations required your interpreting services? Were you interpreting for civilians who had got caught up in the fighting? Were they adults, children, or both? Did you interpret for enemy soldiers during debriefing or interrogation? Or at meetings of



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some kind? What sort of conversations were you required to interpret?

I interpreted for all sorts of situations, mostly for adults. I was interpreting for civilians who got caught up in ethnic fights, protests, robberies, and other threatening situations. This kind of interpreting was done in the open and was not confidential. But I also had to interpret for enemy soldiers during debriefing and interrogation, mostly for the war crimes tribunals. I was also called to interpret at meetings between generals, officers, soldiers, and community members of different ethnicities. These meetings were very confidential.

Which of your languages did you use most frequently?

I used Albanian, Serbian, and English most of the time.

What was your status in the eyes of the enemy forces? If you were a civilian, was

that respected, or were you considered an enemy soldier, regardless?

My status was that I was a member of the KFOR unit, even though I was a civilian. That was respected most of the time, but there were instances when I was considered an enemy soldier or interpreter. It depended on the situation and on whether people were being accused or if we were there to help them.

Were you ever captured by enemy forces?

No, I was never captured, and I never heard about any other interpreters being captured at that time. We were pretty safe in that sense because we were with soldiers.

Given the ethnic diversity of the Balkans, what sort of resources did you have at your disposal when faced with unfamiliar terminology? For example, were you able to consult with fellow interpreters or do research online? Was there a "library" of some kind at your base camp?

Yes, we could consult with fellow interpreters if we got stuck. We used to ask each other about words that were new to us. Different interpreters were good in different areas, and we learned from each other every day. You could say that we had a class after our shifts, when we would stay late and talk to each other about that sort of thing. There were no libraries or online research options, but we had dictionaries with us at all times that we could use if needed.

ATA's Code of Ethics expects translators and interpreters "to convey meaning between people and cultures faithfully, accurately, and impartially." The commentary on the code explains that, "impartial translation and interpreting requires the translator or interpreter to adopt a mantle of neutrality." In the heat of battle, on the front lines of a war zone, what sort of situations did you encounter that challenged your commitment to that mantle of neutrality?

There were times when I felt angry about certain situations, but when it came to interpreting and doing my job, I did the best I could to interpret faithfully and accurately and tried my best to be neutral. I was there during the war in the 1990s. I remembered our neighbors shooting at

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OUR WORLD OF WORDS continued

us as my family and I ran for our lives, hoping and praying their bullets wouldn't hit us. So, later on, it wasn't easy to be neutral when I had to interpret for those same neighbors and the KFOR soldiers. I knew I was there to interpret for these individuals, not to judge, but keeping all that straight was very difficult. I learned more about how to remain impartial as time went by.

What was the most challenging aspect of your job as an interpreter with KFOR?

The most demanding part of being an interpreter for KFOR was having to experience and feel what soldiers and peacemakers go through. To make sure I interpreted accurately, I was also learning more English every day, every hour, while trying to improve myself in every way.

How did your assignment come to an end? Did your tour of duty expire? Did you decide you were ready to move on?

The sad part was the British KFOR forces were stationed in Kosovo for only two years. Their main focus was landmine eradication rather than other tasks. When their tour or contract ended, they were replaced with KFOR troops from Finland. However, the replacement troops favored the enemy side, the minorities as they were calling them. My colleagues and I were no longer being treated as we had been by the British, so we all left and moved on. Some went to work for other agencies such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, International Rescue Committee, or the police department as interpreters. I took my savings and opened a restaurant in Lipjan. I worked at it for a year, which was a complete change of lifestyle.

What did you learn from that assignment that helped you later on in other interpreting or translating jobs?

I'm not really sure because I stopped interpreting for a while after the assignment ended. I started interpreting again once I came to the U.S., but it's different over here. You have the opportunity to take classes and learn more, you can work remotely online (which is easier), and you can become a certified interpreter or translator, or

be screened for work in the courts. The experience doesn't feel the same. Perhaps it's because interpreting under dangerous conditions made it more challenging for me. I loved taking risks

Looking back, do you miss any part of that assignment?

I miss every single day of that time and every assignment. It was a dream job. That was the best time of my life.

What was the most memorable incident during your time with KFOR?

I can't think of anything in particular, but I do remember my first flight in a helicopter. We were trying to cheer up some kids whose village had been burned. The soldiers took the kids for a ride and I was assigned to accompany them. The kids enjoyed it, but my stomach didn't!

How would you compare your experience in Kosovo to what interpreters are currently facing in the Middle East?

I would say my experience was pretty similar, except that interpreters now probably have more options to search for terminology online and learn more that way. As far as the danger is concerned, it's hard to tell. I would say that interpreters in the Middle East are probably in more danger.

What advice do you have for translators or interpreters who might sign up to work in a war zone?

My advice to them would be to follow all the rules, be accurate, be faithful, be safe, try to interpret as fast as you can, and do your best to be neutral.

Many thanks, Besim, for this interesting perspective on the role of the interpreter in unusual circumstances. ◉



Tony Beckwith was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, spent his formative years in Montevideo, Uruguay, then set off to see the world. He moved to Texas in 1980 and currently lives in Austin, Texas, where he works as a writer, translator, poet, and cartoonist. Contact: tony@tonybeckwith.com.