

Nikolina Trkulja b. 28/5/84

Transcript of interview with Judy Caine – 22nd September 2019

(N.B. – timecode numbers refer to the audio recording)

Judy Caine [00:00:01] OK. My name's Judy Caine. As you know, and it is Sunday the 22nd of September, 2019 and I'm at the Banfield community centre with Niki who in a minute is going to give me her full name. And we're going to talk about Serbian dance, Serbian culture and anything else she'd like to tell me about.

So, Niki thank you for doing this. Could you give me your full name and your date of birth.

Nikolina Trkulja [00:00:25] Yes, it's Nikolina Trkulja and it's 28th May 1984.

Judy Caine [00:00:30] Wow, gosh you're 4 years younger than my eldest son. I feel old now!

[00:00:38] Niki, can you tell me first, I know you live in Northampton right now, what brought you to England?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:00:46] I came here with my parents in 1999 due to the war in Croatia. Where were Serbs born and living in Croatia. So, it wasn't safe for us there. So, my parents decided to come here to UK, and I was about 15 when we came here, with my sister, my mom and dad.

Judy Caine [00:01:05] So you were Serbians living in Croatia.

Nikolina Trkulja [00:01:08] Yes.

Judy Caine [00:01:08] Where were you born in Serbia?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:01:11] I wasn't born in Serbia, I was born in Croatia.

Judy Caine [00:01:14] But your parents were Serbian?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:01:17] No.

Judy Caine [00:01:17] I'm confused. Help?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:01:18] It's very confusing, and it would take a very long time to explain, but part of Croatia where I come from was mainly Serb population lived there, so, well above 90 percent would be a Serbian population in Croatia and I would imagine obviously at some time ago when they were moving around that's obviously you know it is difficult to explain I suppose is for historians to debate that but yes. So, we lived in Croatian, but we are Serbs and the part of Croatia where we lived was mainly Serb population.

Judy Caine [00:01:58] I understand it's very, very complex.

Nikolina Trkulja [00:01:59] Yes. No not for me to you know.

Judy Caine [00:02:03] No, no, I don't really want to get into all that because it is so complicated and you're not the only person to say it would take forever to explain so don't worry.



[00:02:10] You say you were 15 when you came here.

Nikolina Trkulja [00:02:13] I was yes.

Judy Caine [00:02:14] Was it scary having to leave Croatia because at that age you'd have been quite aware of the war, what was happening. If you don't talk about that that's fine but if you're happy to?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:02:26] Yes, I suppose it was scary, I think one thing that made it better for me was that when we came here, we also came with another family whose child was also a friend of mine we went to school together. So, that made it a bit easier. And then when we did come here there were also a few. We came to Gloucester, and there were a few Serbian families there. So, we got to know them. So that made it a bit easier. I suppose the difficult part was as well. I didn't speak any English when I came here. I knew very few words just by watching mainly American movies back home so going to school without the knowledge of the English language was very difficult. Yes. But I did have um English language lessons for a year. Um and because I was 15 at the time um rather than going into Year 11, they put me in sixth form just to go to less than get used to their language. And, and you know how they teach and alongside that I had three times a week I think I had um a lady coming to teach me English language. So, following that I just continued in the sixth form and then went to uni afterwards.

Judy Caine [00:03:42] Wow that's really good. If you came you were 15 straight to 'A levels', then to UNI well done. Did you find um the education system here very different from that in Croatia?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:03:53] Um yes. It was it was different because I do find stuff over there. We used to learn a lot of stuff sort of like we had to memorize it and then we'd have a test and we had tests quite often maybe every few weeks. Whereas here there was a lot more essay writing rather than anything and coursework and stuff like that. So, I found that was that was quite different, uh not to say a particularly easier or harder. it was just it was just very different. But aside from that I don't think there was that much difference to be honest. The lessons were definitely longer here. So last thing about I think nearly an hour whereas um in Serbia Croatia it's about 45 minutes and we used to finish school - I would start early in the morning at half 7:00 and we'd be finished by half 12, 1 o' clock depending on how many lessons we that day.

Judy Caine [00:04:51] Was there a reason for that.

Nikolina Trkulja [00:04:54] I don't know that's how it was always done, and I think back home it's still exactly the same. I think the lessons are shorter, so 45 minutes. Um we'd had a half an hour lunch break rather than an hour long, I think. Um and couple of shorter ten-minute breaks if I remember correctly.

Judy Caine [00:05:11] What's the temperature like in Serbia, is it like a Siesta? Because they start very early in places like Spain, don't they and then finish early because it gets too hot in the afternoon to think.

Nikolina Trkulja [00:05:20] So, the temperature and the climate over there is you get very harsh winters with loads of snow, but you get very hot summers and you get your autumn and spring it's quite, you can actually see the difference between. So, that was sort of I suppose as well the big surprise when we came here because here it feels like you have an autumn and the spring, more or less, in comparison to what it's like over there. But yeah, I don't think that the lessons, the hours of the lessons had anything to do with that.

Judy Caine [00:05:50] What about holidays did you get like a six-week summer holiday that we have here?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:05:54] We have a lot more, so our children tend to finish school. I think at the end of May beginning of June and they wouldn't start until September. So, they had longer summer holidays. They still have, um maybe less holidays. Aside from that though, they get I think a couple of weeks. Um I'm just trying to remember because I was only 15 when I left.

Judy Caine [00:06:18] Yes, I know.

Nikolina Trkulja [00:06:18] I think it was probably about a couple of weeks two to three weeks during the Christmas time but on that new year Christmas um and maybe a bit more around Easter and then mainly it's all in the summer holidays.

Judy Caine [00:06:29] Hmm. You mentioned Christmas and Easter. How important is religion to most Croatian Serbians?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:06:36] So, Serbian community it's very important, and at Christmas itself it's a big part of Serbian community and also it falls in a different date, it falls in 7th of January because we follow, our church follows the Julian calendar.

Judy Caine [00:06:51] Is this the Russian Orthodox or Orthodox Church?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:06:58] Yes. I think Russians, Greeks just a few others, very few that still follow the traditional calendar like we do. So that's very important to us as well as Slava, what we called Slava which is something that's quite unique to Serbian tradition.

Judy Caine [00:07:17] Is that S-L-A-V-A?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:07:17] Yes, that's correct.

Judy Caine [00:07:20] What's that?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:07:20] It's probably what sort of defines us as well as a culture. So, we each family has like a patron saint, a protector of the family. And on that day, we would prepare a big feast and celebrate that, and we'd have friends come round so obviously as each family has a different saint or go to each other's houses, on their specific day. And preparing our traditional foods there. So, um I think one day it's always on the table is the roast piglets as well along with all the other traditional foods that we have.

Judy Caine [00:08:00] Which are, because I don't know what traditional foods are - do tell!

Nikolina Trkulja [00:08:02] So, I suppose I can I can talk about what I normally prepare for my Slava. So, um I would have like a soup as a starter with some chicken and beef, and that's boiled, so after the soup you follow with that chicken and beef and vegetables with sauce. And then after that goes what we call it is just very traditional for us it's Sarma, and Sarma is something that's like um it's um a cabbage leaf, sauerkraut, that is filled with minced meat. And that is cooked. So that is served and then after that follows the roast piglets, just normally done on a spit roast.

Judy Caine [00:08:49] Wow. So, the soup, made with the boiled chicken and beef and vegetables. You take them out and have a very clear soup.

Nikolina Trkulja [00:09:00] The soup we put the noodles in soup noodles.

Judy Caine [00:09:04] OK.

Nikolina Trkulja [00:09:04] So it's more like a spaghetti type noodles. Yes. So, that's served first and then followed by Meat and vegetables with a tomato sauce.

Judy Caine [00:09:18] And then you have the Sarma.

Nikolina Trkulja [00:09:19] Yeah.

Judy Caine [00:09:22] And that's like sauerkraut cabbage filled with mince.

Nikolina Trkulja [00:09:25] With minced meat, yes.

Judy Caine [00:09:27] Is that minced pork, minced beef?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:09:29] Normally it's a combination of the two. It just depends people's preferences. A bit of fried onion with that together and some rice as well. A bit of rice in there and it's all wrapped in a cabbage leaf and then boiled.

Judy Caine [00:09:42] Sounds lovely and then you have the roast Piglet as well, after that.

Nikolina Trkulja [00:09:46] And then after that, of course we've got the cakes, loads of different traditional cakes as well.

Judy Caine [00:09:50] Define traditional cakes?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:09:54] I say traditional, but it's very difficult to explain unless you sort of see it on a plate. This variety of like Cookie style almost like a bit like shortbread, but it's done in different shapes and you can, you can make it with walnuts or almonds or there's loads and loads of different ones. And you've got some that look like a bit like um waffle cakes filled with chocolate, um to some cream cakes and things it just depends. One that we think we always normally see at Slavers is what we call Russian Hats and they are like a like a sponge that's cut in a circle and it's uh dipped into chocolate, and then the side of that is dipped into coconut as well. So, it looks like a Russian hat. So that's quite a, I suppose, a traditional one that you tend to see in Slavers as well as um cake, that is again a sponge that's dipped into chocolate and then the whole of it is like a square. And it's also dipped into um into coconut.

Nikolina Trkulja [00:11:04] But there's loads of different ones.

Judy Caine [00:11:05] Which is your favourite?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:11:08] My favourite is probably the Russian hats. (Laughs)

Judy Caine [00:11:11] What date is your Slava?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:11:13] Um the date of my Slava is the 20th of January.

Judy Caine [00:11:17] And that is Saint who?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:11:19] Um Saint Jovan, or here it is translated into the Baptist.

Judy Caine [00:11:27] St. John the Baptist?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:11:29] St. John the Baptist. Yes.

Judy Caine [00:11:33] OK, gosh, that is absolutely fascinating. So. How come if you went to Gloucester you're now living in Northampton and your chair of the Serbian Folklore Ensemble in Corby. How did that happen?



Nikolina Trkulja [00:11:46] So, my kids first joined the group, I think about a year ago it must have been now. So, we just found that in Northampton we don't really have many Serbian families, certainly none with children as little as mine. So, my children don't really have much contact with other children from Serbian families and we just found that it's, for us, it's important that they learn to know, our language and we find that can get quite challenging to get them to still speak the language as they're growing. Because in general our children here from Serbian communities tend to integrate really well in British communities say, we don't have any challenges with that. But the challenge is more to get them to still keep up the Serbian language and maybe know some about the traditions about the where their parents come from Serbian traditions. So, bringing him here to learn the Serbian dance, to learn about the costumes and then not only have the events and performances then, um learn about different traditional foods, although we also do that in the house anyway. But um I think it's just, it was just important for us for our children to experience that and get to know that and interact a bit more with other children as well.

Judy Caine [00:13:08] Why is it important.?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:13:10] I dunno, I suppose it's, I feel that it's our responsibility as parents to pass on that tradition to our kids and so that they know. And in general, I think regardless of Serbian background or you know another background, I feel it's important that you understand where you've come from and what the traditions there are. Especially coz nowadays people tend to travel all around the world and learn about different traditions for instance, and cultural backgrounds. And I think it's it will be bit sad if you don't know much about yours as well, at the same time. Um and then also I suppose thinking from our side as well if we do go back to say Croatia to visit family, if we go on holidays, if we go for weddings there, it's much easier for the kids and for the families over there if the kids can speak to them, interact with them, uh be familiar with the food as well, and also if they go to the weddings there is no Serbian wedding without a traditional dance. So, it's much more enjoyable for them if they know how to do the dance.

Judy Caine [00:14:20] Of course. Do you get back very often?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:14:24] Generally, yes, we probably go to Croatia pretty much every year for a holiday and visit family for a vacation to Serbia.

Judy Caine [00:14:36] Is it difficult for you to go back?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:14:39] It's not difficult, but it's not the same as it used to be. So, the parts of Croatia where we come from are pretty much deserted now. The majority of people that do live there now mainly elderly people that are still there. So, it's for my children for example, they don't really have many kids there to play with. So, yeah. So, it's, it's I suppose it's difficult in the sense that it's not the same anymore. It doesn't feel the same.

Judy Caine [00:15:12] You've just taken over as chair of the group here, and it has an amazing reputation for doing fantastic performances in the town. I know the former mayor Ann Brown often gets you to perform at charity events and stuff. What are your hopes for the future for the group? Two questions actually. Why did you take over on what are your hopes for the future for the group?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:15:36] So, um I would just really like for the group to still continue working and that these traditions and the dances are taught to our children here as well it's supposed to preserve their identity as well. But um we do have daily challenges like, you know, when our, some members of the groups do leave because they go to unis or that they decide to leave for whatever reason it is, it gets more challenging to have enough members as well. So, when the previous lead stepped down. Then I just, I suppose I volunteered to take over. There wasn't many volunteers that were willing because I wanted to make sure that this still exists, that my boys continue attending and that the group done amazing things in the past, and it would be a shame if we weren't able to continue to do that in the future.

Judy Caine [00:16:43] How old are you boys.

Nikolina Trkulja [00:16:44] My boys are 9 and 7.

Judy Caine [00:16:48] Lovely age. One last question - I know you've got to get back out there and then we can haul Max in. This project that we're doing with the Deep Roots Tall Trees choir and dancetheatre, trying to get to just understand a little bit more about the Serbian culture in this case. What do you think of projects like that where we're trying to foster greater understanding? Do you think it's a valid thing to do?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:17:10] I think it's a brilliant thing to do. Um I think it's really good that we can understand different cultural backgrounds in Corby or Northamptonshire, so that people can interact and understand when they're interacting with each other as well. Um I just think it's just great to celebrate a different cultural background and learn more about it. I suppose it also gives confidence as well to different cultures and their children as well to see that they're not the only ones that have certain costumes or certain music. There's loads about the different communities that do similar things as well.

Judy Caine [00:17:44] That's brilliant. Is there anything I haven't asked you that you are burning to tell me about?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:17:51] No, I think we've covered everything.

Judy Caine [00:17:55] You mentioned song to do song in the folk, in the folk group or is it purely dance?

Nikolina Trkulja [00:18:01] It's purely dancing at the moment. I think we have had before a few occasions where we have taught our children a song or two, where they have performed it at a couple of events. But it's mainly dance.

Judy Caine [00:18:16] Thank you very much indeed.

Nikolina Trkulja [00:18:18] You're welcome.