INTERVIEW WITH OLIVERA BUDIMIR

Conducted by forumZFD

Belgrade | Date: July 13, 2016
Duration: 162 minutes

Present:

1. Olivera Budimir (Speaker)
2. Nataša Govedarica (Interviewer)
3. Boris Sebez (Camera)

Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:
() – emotional communication
{} – the speaker explains something using gestures.

Other transcription conventions:
[ ] - addition to the text to facilitate comprehension
Footnotes are editorial additions to provide information on localities, names or expressions.

Part One

Nataša Govedarica: I would first like to ask you to introduce yourself, tell us your name and something about your family's origin, also your earlier memories.

Olivera Budimir: I am Olivera Budimir. I am from Pristina but I live in Belgrade now. I fled Pristina in '99 after the events in Kosovo, after the war in Kosovo and I always emphasize that I didn't come to Belgrade, precisely because coming is not the same as fleeing. Coming is a choice, it's a good will, while fleeing is a must, a must, against which we all resist. In fact, I have always lived in Pristina with my parents, my brothers and then my husband, that's where I got married. I worked, he worked, we had a beautiful life, a beautiful marriage. Both my family and his were from that region, near there. It's a relatively small city, but not too small to not possess all components of a large city, so it offered a comfortable and good living to us. We never had any problem with our neighbors, we are not charged, neither my family nor my husband's family are educated in that way to be charged nationally or on ethnic basis, hence we lived quietly.

Both he and I had achieved a certain status. We had a good life in the city and thought that everything was going in a normal direction. It was just the brink of the war when we decided to expand our family, to create our descendants and fulfill that wish in order to be a complete family. However, the war happened, an abyss opened. Then everything happened that shouldn't have happened, so his life and at the same time mine stopped somewhere at point zero, they stopped one by one, we cannot say because of a superior power, but through negligence and lack of responsibility of some people or something like that, political people or something like that.

Nataša Govedarica: What are the first memories of your family life in Pristina, you were born in Pristina and that's where you lived with your family, how do you remember that period?

Olivera Budimir: My father is a native, my father was born in Pristina, his parents as well. So, all of my memories are connected to Pristina, in addition to this, I've said this before, but similarly, the events, the bad events, the nationalist events unfortunately happened before the war as well as during the other war. Until then there was [World War] One and Two, and way earlier, but my father fled Prishtina once in '43. He left all his property and desired to return to his hearth. I have to emphasize that he never got his property and his house back. It stayed like that until this day, but he needed to be there. We were all there and we were all raised there with my brothers, three of my brothers and me, but my father was a quiet person by nature who didn't want to create disagreements with anyone because of fields and meadows or because of properties, so all that remained in another plan.

To him, the family, the health of his children and not having any disagreement with anyone in order to always live in peace, were the most important things, because he always told me that his children are the most important. No wealth could compensate for us. So, I have… he already experienced this expulsion on his skin. He came back as a proletarian, with nothing, with no property, no house and then we recreated all of it, he and my mother and of course we also did so later on, while we were growing up. And again, we created a place, we rebuilt a place from almost nothing. I somehow have it in my mind that the one who had it will have it again, because they will try to regain it and to replace it, because property is always replaceable, only life cannot be. So, none of us was heavy-headed over property or with the fact that we had nothing at the moment, "We will manage to gain it one day," this never concerned us.

However, we lived in a peaceful, quiet way, we studied in school, we finished it, somehow made it to employment. There were four for one, seven for one in comparison, I can't say, Albanians. Back then they were *šiptari*,[1] then Albanians, with all due respect because it's everyone's right to call themselves the way they want to, I respect this, why not. I can now say that I am African and everyone can say it, but what then, everybody can be, right? This is so relative, it's a choice. But in my school booklet where I studied, it's written *šiptarski* language, but some time after the approval of the [1974] Constitution it was changed into Albanian language, however this is irrelevant too. However, my father spoke *šiptarski* and not Albanian because he himself would say, "I don't understand the language you're learning now in schools."

He spoke *šiptarski* language together with the local population as a native tongue. I think he spoke Roma language as fluently as he spoke French and Italian, because he learned it while working together with them in the railway. At that time in the city, in the period when my father lived and was

[1] *Šiptar/i* Serbian for Albanian/s. This is considered a derogatory term for Albanians from Kosovo, because it establishes a distinction between them and Albanians from the Republic of Albania, *Albanac/Albanci.* In this context, it also alludes to the difference between the Northern Albanian variant, *Gheg*, which is spoken in Kosovo, and the standardized Albanian based on the Southern variant, *Tosk*.

raised, all the people spoke all the local languages because that's their way of respecting each-other, but something always happened, but they were somehow out of the city, out of our feelings and knowledge, so we lived in a peaceful way, we lived in a peaceful way.

Nataša Govedarica: You're the only girl or the only sister among three brothers. Did this position bring you any privilege or time after time was it… let's say, problematic? How were you treated in your family and how were you treated in society while growing up, during your studies?

Olivera Budimir: In my family, I have to say, since I was the only girl, somehow in some cases I was protected in a way, but in another way not. I never asked for it because I am not such type. I know that my parents celebrated only my birthday, I always celebrated it. As for my brothers, it was barely known when their birthdays were, but my birthday was marked even if in a minimal way or however it was, somehow my wishes were fulfilled. As for my brothers, I always enjoyed a place, "She is she," and that's how it was. It's not discussed, my brothers never swore in front of me and even today, because of an inner feeling, and this not because someone told them not to, but it was just like that. We are, in Kosovo you only have it a little, we are patriarchal towards the family, we protect sisters, brothers are strongly bonded and I like that it's like that. I was in a special place, but I still had another one.

My mother was from Serbia, from Blaca, Serbian. She was taught that the child of the female sex was supposed to work and that's how I had to help my mother, I always had to be the adult, I always had to… "The others can play, but you have to help me!" So, in some cases I was the protected and the favorite one, while in some others not. Still, I am such type that I have the feeling that I protect my three brothers more than they protect me, because, "She can do everything on her own, she doesn't need protection," and I am somehow like a kind of falcon. Probably that's how sisters are… and that's how they should be. I don't know, I would love to have a sister, but may my brothers have a long life.

Nataša Govedarica: Where is your position among your siblings?

Olivera Budimir: The second, the second.

Nataša Govedarica: Now that you are talking about education, you finished your primary school in Pristina, your primary and secondary school?

Olivera Budimir: Yes, and I studied in Belgrade, in Pristina too, but also Belgrade.

Nataša Govedarica: And what did all this look like? In which years did you go to primary school in Pristina? It's around… the '60s?

Olivera Budimir: Exactly, I don't precisely know when I registered. I know that I studied during the '70s and something. I think those are some of the years of a beautiful period, when no one had

[anything] but at the same time we all had [something], because we had peace in our souls and I love that part of our life because we were equal in schools and so on. There were no differences in the lifestyle standards among people, but we were all close to each-other, we went to school together, both the children of [state] officials and the children of workers in the same class. There were no big differences and troubles, and as for the fact that the school had two or three languages, back then there was also the department of Turkish language. We went to school at the same time, we were never together. Everybody had their own class, everybody would meet their friends and no one saw or met the other one except the children of the same neighborhood, with whom we got along without any anger, without… there was nothing that bothered us. Also because our parents didn't say to me and my brothers, "Don't make friends with that, or that is such or this is such." It absolutely was not like that. We ourselves chose our friendship, but I don't know why, there was always a kind of filtering happening so that we always made friends within our circles. That is to say, we lived in a parallel way.

Nataša Govedarica: As for language obstacles, you mentioned that at that time in school… that your father spoke various languages, what did you learn in school?

Olivera Budimir: This is very characteristic. In school, I learned the *šiptarski* language since the fourth grade then around the seventh grade, sixth or seventh it was *gjuhë shqipe* [Albanian Language], and in the school booklet it was *šiptarski* language. Then we learned basic communication, as every other child. We learned songs, we learned all these, however, my father spoke the language as his mother tongue. We never learned it, I never learned it. Probably because at that time there was the pressure that we had to learn it. When one is forced to do something, they don't do it. No one forced my father to learn it, but they all learned it, they knew it. But we were asked to.

This is something internal, it's not what I think now. At that time I didn't think about this, I just know that we didn't, I didn't speak it. I pretty much understood it, but spoke it very little, and it's the same now, but truly I just didn't need it, because they always knew the Serbian language. We thought that it was natural because the administration was in the Serbian language, because you had to go to the Municipality, and its services. Alright, there was also bilingualism, but we can't all have everything, also some things needed to be told. So it was somehow, I don't know how, but they all knew it, even though at some point, not always, they were the majority, but all of them knew it since they were born. Was it a feeling of theirs, I have no idea, I never understood this, it's not that I didn't think about it.

I remember when my nephew, when my brother got married… this happened sometime in the '80s, when his son was born and raised around '86-'87, when he had already became a boy, he would get along with other children from the neighborhood as we did. He is, all of them are so little, this little {shows with hands}, they know [the language], they come here to the garden and invite him and talk

to him, play together and call, “Dejan, come!” And leave together to play and such. He never learned it. But no one ever told him not to, I don’t know why this is the way it is. But he never told him, “Don’t do it, Dejan!” But how could we say so, when he was already playing with them, when no one stopped him from going to birthday celebrations, playing, getting along, playing in the garden, in our garden, but he never learned it. Probably this is a resistance because you could feel some kind, something that you have to… but whenever there’s resistance, it’s something small.

Nataša Govedarica: What did you finish later in secondary school or gymnasium?

Olivera Budimir: The Secondary School of Medicine.

Nataša Govedarica: Also in Pristina?

Olivera Budimir: Yes.

Nataša Govedarica: Is there something special you remember from the period of secondary school, any friendship, first loves. What happened in that time?

Olivera Budimir: Well, I was an excellent student in secondary school.

Nataša Govedarica: Just as I was expecting it.

Olivera Budimir: I was the leader of my class, also the secretary of the school, of the students’ organizations or whatever they were called, the youth organizations of the school. I was very active, they chose me here and there, somehow they chose me everywhere. I was somehow, I thought I was a quiet student, but I was a good student, I was a good student, for example I have good memories from my class, and in general I have good memories from my school. I was not the type of problematic child by any means. Of course there were also love songs there and everything else that follows. I was not problematic. I had the support of my parents and so on. But, the education, what is important is to tell your parents first rather than let them be told by your neighbors because… why let the neighbors whisper and not let your parents know yourself. My parents understood that this was a process of growing up and that’s how it was supposed to be, so there was no… [problems]. It was good recalling these memories, but alright, this is all.

Some lives of ours pass and mark the time of our youth, but I think I lived too fast. I always lived too fast. I liked getting along with people and going out, I had some hobbies which I still have. As a student I started tailoring for my friends because, “Can you make one for me? Can you make one for me? Who tailored it for you? I did it myself” {mimics the conversations}. Then, in a period when I had free time, I tailored, I earned money because that time was not when youth earned money for real, somehow it was not like that. But I had my own idea… no one forced me to. I wanted to and that’s why I worked,

then at the time of exams I always passed and I regularly went to the faculty, and everyone knew that, "Now Ola is passing her exams," and that's how it was. When I have free time I sit and tailor, earn money, go to the seaside with friends and come back or buy something for my house, some of my wishes which were higher than my parents possibilities. So it was good being active and I think I lived for three hundred hours and I had enough time for myself and for my brothers. I wore the best jumpers and the most modern ones of the time, the first bell bottom trousers, I tailored them myself because I wanted them to be beautiful, to make that. This was it, it was beautiful.

Nataša Govedarica: What did you choose for your studies?

Olivera Budimir: First, I studied French language in Pristina, but then I registered in the School of Medicine, with a Public Health major in Belgrade, so I studied in both of them. I regularly passed my exams. Then I finished the Faculty of Medicine in Belgrade, then I got employed, so I didn't graduate in French, but not that I didn't study enough. I didn't fail any exam, but because I stopped. I couldn't keep going any longer in order to refine the language, but I stopped and it got stuck there, otherwise I could finish that too.

Nataša Govedarica: But you mainly lived in Pristina. You came to Belgrade only when you needed to or how was it?

Olivera Budimir: I only came here to take my exams, but I lived in Pristina.

Nataša Govedarica: If you compared Belgrade to Pristina in that time, can you tell us how was life here and there, and what attracted you here and there?

Olivera Budimir: I didn't feel any need for Belgrade. I loved my place, my Pristina, I mean mine, I don't say mine, the city belongs to no one but some of us embrace it. Everybody has the title of something, where we lived and put our roots. I remember once when I went to submit or present an exam, I don't know, I don't remember. And while I was at a kiosk buying a card to send to Pristina, the saleswoman asked me, "Where are you from?" I said, "From Pristina." "Are there such girls in Pristina?" Maybe those here in Belgrade thought that we "down there"[2] were something, as if we had fallen from another world, I don't know, from under the ground. We didn't differ much from the ones who were here. I mean, we studied the same in Belgrade and in Pristina. The song was on another level, we had some of our own there.

My younger brother was the main guitarist [in a band], a solo guitarist in Pristina, who held gigs with his godfather and his band all around Pristina. The first electric guitar, I mean, the main guitarist. I don't mean the first guitar which was brought "down there", because he still plays in the same way,

[2] This is how Serbs referred to Kosovo, since Belgrade, Serbia was considered to be the center.

it's just that he is not as engaged as he used to be, but he organized [gigs] all around "down there." The halls were full, there was… there were terraces and everything was full, I mean, we lived well, the *korzo*[3] was excellent, in the middle of Pristina every night from around six o'clock, seven o'clock until eight o'clock, we would eventually disperse at eight-thirty. Many people walked there, there were two lanes. Serbs walked on one side, while Albanians walked on the other side. We never walked together. Who hatched this we can… was it spontaneous or ordered or such. People stayed there normally, everybody had their own tree. People looked at girls, girls walked or such, but we walked in parallel.

Nataša Govedarica: Which are these years, Olivera?

Olivera Budimir: Well, I don't know which were those years, maybe the middle of the '80s, when these walks on the *korzo* stopped. I think it was something like that. I am not sure, I don't remember, but I know there were walks every night. At that time we went out early and returned home early, we knew when we had to be home. I had very strict parents. I had to be home by [a certain time] when I went to school, my school was very, very close to my house. The medical high school was at the end, at the edge of the city. I walked to school and came back home by foot too, because there was no, there was a kind of transportation, but I was not sure that I would arrive in time and so on. Such is youth. The class lasted until seven but until a quarter past seven we had… because we had responsibilities, if I was the caretaker [of the classroom], we the students had to clean the classroom and put everything in its place. I had to be home at a quarter to eight the latest, exactly a quarter to eight. It was not close at all, and I would quickly take a walk only if we missed any class, but I had to meet the time, I had to come back home early, and no later than nine. This was the maximum, I had to be home at nine, nine zero zero. I had to be home at nine. Until I obtained ten zero zero that was, *o ho hoi* {onomatopoeic} there was no way I could be later than that. My mother would never give up, "You can go wherever you want during the day," my father would say, "but at night, you have to be home. It's not the right place nor the right time."

My father understood the political situation. Maybe he always talked to other people as if they were his people, because he spoke the languages and they didn't notice because they knew who was what. Neither did he believe in the existing peace. He always knew that it would come to this situation which happened later, and he always told us, but none of us believed him. My brothers and I didn't believe him and always said, "Father, please allow us to go out until a certain time." That time had passed who knows when. Unfortunately it turned out that he was right because each time we would triumph, create or buy something, he would say, "You will leave all these behind and flee." Unfortunately what he said turned out to be true. He paid it himself once he was forced to leave everything behind and flee, that's why he didn't believe in anything because he had his reasons. He simply believed that that

[3] Main street, reserved for pedestrians

would happen even though he always wanted to be here and a human cannot be imprisoned and wait for what will happen next. Life must go on. But he was a prisoner of his time and what had happened to him.

Nataša Govedarica: How much do you actually know about what had happened to him in '43, or has it remained as foreboding?

Olivera Budimir: Very little, and I feel so bad for it. He told us how he was chased the night he had to leave the house, to leave the house and on the same day fled with some basic furniture. There was a train crossing through Pristina and it was led by *ballist*[4] as far as I remember, then he had to pay a big amount of money in order to leave as quick as possible to Niš. That's how he left for Niš. He didn't want to join any kind of army, he was not the type, but we didn't have… unfortunately many things of ours are left unsaid, maybe this is the price of youth. We didn't ask him for many things, we didn't have the patience to listen to many things and he didn't want to impose them to us. We just let it pass the way it was, but of course it was not easy for him to pack all his stuff one morning and leave in such a rush, then in '46, no, in '56 he got married while in emigration. Because when he returned… he tried to return but there was snow in Prelace and he couldn't manage to, the truck he was travelling with couldn't manage to cross then he stayed there in Kuršumlijska Banja[5] and that's where he got married to my mother, then my brother was born and that's how this history was.

But he always wanted to return to his place, and he returned, but he knew that it would be the way it was. However, he wanted to stay there because wherever he was - he was in Niš, then in Kuršumlija, then in Kuršumlijska Banja and so on, he was everywhere - he was a master tinsmith, a first class master. At that time masters were sought after because there was nothing, nothing that was working, neither did manufacturing nor anything else, but all this had left big marks. He was everywhere, but had his roots nowhere. They called him *klonfer,*[6] no one knew his name. No one would know now who was that Slobodan who was there, who lived among them. He is the only *klonfer*, he got along with locals, he was with them all the time, he talked about his experiences, but he never was one of them. In fact he always wanted to turn back, but we were renting public housing until we earned again because he had nothing of his own. He never was able to repossess his property because the '48 law limited all of those who returned in '48, they couldn't demand their property back. He was limited in that way that he wasn't able to demand his property back.

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[4] Member or supporter of *Balli Kombëtar* (National Front) which was an Albanian nationalist, anti-communist organization established in November 1942, an insurgency that fought against Nazi Germany and Yugoslav partisans. It was headed by Midhat Frashëri, and supported the unification of Albanian inhabited lands.
[5] Spa town in Southern Serbia.
[6] Serbian: a master who works with tin or tinplate, colloquial: tinsmith, tinman.

Nataša Govedarica: Did you know where that house was located?

Olivera Budimir: Yes, I went there earlier. He never wanted to send us there. I went to see it and I looked at it from a distance. I mean, I never had a particular feeling for it except what my father told me, but he never talked about it, he barely talked about it. I went once to see his fields near the city, a one hectare-wide land, which now has a big value but we don't have the land titles, I think they remained in the basement, furthermore we, the kids, were never interested in whose name was the land title registered in, because back then they used to immediately be carried forward from one generation to another. Then the last names have changed, the nephew [here her father] took the last name of his grandfather and so on, so it was difficult.

I tried to find something, because I worked in the Local Assembly, I tried to research who owns it, where the land title was, what happened to it. I couldn't look for it using that name because my father was Aksić, while his father was Nedeljković, because my father's grandfather was called Aksa and he took the last name of his grandfather, that's how it was. His father died when my father was six years old. He was little, his mother was a civilized Pristina woman. They were real ladies and liked to drink coffee, they liked the process of drinking coffee, of creating relationships that way, they didn't know some of the rumours, taxes, this and that, it was simply like that. This is how it was, to me and my family it was lost, this was the least. We are used to living without it, that's how we always lived.

Nataša Govedarica: Now, I apologize for changing topic, but you were at around the time of your studies, around the time when you finished your studies in Belgrade, and you, if I understood you well, you returned to Pristina to work?

Olivera Budimir: I never left Pristina.

Nataša Govedarica: Clear.

Olivera Budimir: I just studied here and there, in a parallel way. Then I got employed in Pristina Local Assembly and continued living and having a good job in the Local Assembly.

Nataša Govedarica: What was exactly your job?

Olivera Budimir: I worked as a Senior Associate in the Health, Veterans, Social Service and Child Protection Secretariat, so, I felt good there, I mean, really good. State employment, as we say. At that time, was so good, it was good having a state job, there were no other jobs, that's how it was. It was good, I had my freedom, the law was the only authority. This was the reason why I kept that job, then I studied law and did it just because I had enough time to study and I made it through the third year,

then I got married and the war began just when I decided to continue studying, then it was too late to finish it etc. etc.

Nataša Govedarica: You mean you were still living with your parents when you started working?

Olivera Budimir: Yes, I was not married yet when I started working, I got married afterwards. My husband was… he is not originally from Kosovo, even though he was born in Kosovo. He is originally from Lika,[7] he is a Lika man. His ancestors moved, his grandparents, his parents were little when King Alexander[8] populated Kosovo with Serbs[9] because there was lack [of people] at that time due to the fleeing and emigration, I guess, I don't have knowledge about that time, of course I don't know, I only know it historically, but they lived there, he finished his education there and worked there. When I met him, he was the head of Travellers' Office in Pristina.

Nataša Govedarica: How did you meet?

Olivera Budimir: I like travelling and he was organizing trips. And I… he organized a beautiful trip to Russia. He was a professional and all of his trips were beautiful. His trips were thought in such a special way that everyone insisted on traveling with him. Because they knew that he always had a joker up his sleeve and will always provide them with something beautiful based on the agreement. It was a real pleasure travelling with him. So, at that time there were two groups and I registered for one trip, to Russia. It was Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and so on, but he managed to convince me not to go with the first group but with the other one. I didn't know he was the leader of the other group, he led it and he had to be there. Alright, we travelled, everything was perfect. I was getting along with someone else whom I met there and it was my dream to see Moscow, to see Russia. It's still attractive to me.

Nataša Govedarica: But this was not your first trip abroad?

Olivera Budimir: No, but one of the biggest, this was my first big trip. Then we were… he organized it very beautifully, except the last day when he called me before leaving, he called me to ask whether everything was alright, actually one night before leaving, because we travelled during the night, whether everything was alright, "Alright, see you at five o'clock, because the bus has to leave from Pristina to Belgrade, and we will continue by plane from Belgrade." I only understood it when on the bus that we were not going to Kiev. I wanted to make a big deal out of it and turn back half of the bus from Belgrade. "You have no right not to notify us about the changing of the schedule. It's my right to

[7] Town in Croatia.
[8] Aleksandar I Karađorđević (1988-1934) also known as Alexander the Unifier, served as a prince regent of the Kingdom of Serbia from 1914 and later became King of Yugoslavia from 1921 to 1934.
[9] Reference to the interwar Agrarian Reform of the Yugoslav Kingdom that favored Serbian small landholders and facilitated a policy of Serbian colonization of Kosovo to change its ethnic composition.

accept it or not when there are changes of the plan." However, of course I didn't do it, but I was really angry and he had to marry me and make up for the Kiev trip to me for many years in a row. But I still didn't see Kiev even later, but this in fact happened at the time of Chernobyl and that's why it was cancelled and we didn't go. At that time it was not known yet. We went some days after Chernobyl but it was still being hidden.

Nataša Govedarica: Which means you met at around the middle of the '80s?

Olivera Budimir: In '86.

Nataša Govedarica: And how did it continue?

Olivera Budimir: Then there… I think it was in Moscow, yes. Since it was really intensive, the program was really good and the friendship too, we walked the whole day, we visited… Moscow and Leningrad are really big cities, they cannot be visited… we walked around the whole day, we visited places with guides or without them, we went to disco clubs to dance, so it was intensive. Those ten days were very intensive, from the morning to the evening. The two of us only passingly met with each-other, or when something happened and he came to visit, to see if everything was alright, in the morning or evening or whenever… we had excellent hotels everywhere or whenever there was a program, a visit, that's when we were there, we were a number, because he was very professional and noticed everything, but in a discrete way, without interfering in anything.

So, there was music in one evening, dance, we all danced and he chose me to dance, but we only danced for half of the song. So symbolic of life, only half of it, the music stopped and the lights turned on. Then we separated somehow and didn't continue any longer and I went to the other table with friends and that was it. There is some kind of… [symbolic] as Ivo Andrić says, "The signs along the way." Then when we went back, he started calling asking me, "How did you liked it, did you rest?" And such questions, however I didn't show any kind of interest. Of course, after some time things developed in another direction, so we got married in January, nine-ten months later.

It was a surprise for all the friends whom we frequented at that time, because none of them knew, none of them expected it, neither did I. But he made it. Once a journalist asked me how did he manage, what was the thing he earned my heart with? I was in a bad position, because I had to choose only one thing among many of them, but I know, I remembered it well and I think that was the reason. He is someone, a man who was self-confident. He knew how to get what he wanted. Self-confidence is very important, and not thinking, "She is like that, let her go, there's no chance," but he believed in himself and that's how he got me. Somehow he managed, even though I didn't trust myself neither

did I trust him, but he managed to convince me to trust him, then we got married and we had a beautiful marriage, with no disagreement, we travelled.

I had no defined limits. I don't know where's the difference from who I was, because I had an absolute freedom to act. We know that freedom for a married woman, of course… I had the freedom to go out with a friend, to travel, to befriend people, to go out in the evening, if I wanted to invite some friends home. I had an absolute freedom, a universal person that I didn't know existed, I absolutely didn't know him that way. I didn't know he existed, but he does. He was professional at his job and to him it was not important who one was, neither was it important which nationality one belonged to. He cooperated with everyone, everybody was his friend, everybody in the city loved him and had only good words about him. So it would be bad on my side to say something bad. I wouldn't have anything to say, it was a good life.

Nataša Govedarica: Until when was life beautiful?

Olivera Budimir: It was until '99, when the hell of war happened. We had, back then I insisted on having a child, because I already had failed once, because of my carelessness, but I had a huge psychological trauma and I couldn't get over it, and then I insisted on having a child. He didn't discuss this issue and never asked, "Why are you insisting, if I don't ask questions?" I always asked myself, "Who are you to ask questions and I did not?" I am not looking for the guilty one, I want results. As if men always have the right to ask questions, women, what now, if they agree, there's nothing we should ask about. But I am not that type.

I am someone who was always herself and always knew what I wanted, and I just wanted to push the process forward just to make it happen, not to give up without trying, and make it possible within the [realm of] possibilities at that moment. It was not simple, because dealing with men is not simple, with their ego and such things, but I managed to do so. However, I made him accept a treatment in order to get over this obstacle even though the doctors always said that everything was alright, but nothing had happened until then, there's a psychological problem, but that's a problem too. We had to find a solution and this happened just on the brink of the war, and now that the earth started to shatter and some other things, I had… I was in my own world, we were in our own world, I thought about this, and I thought that this… that the crisis or the political escalation would be solved, however it was not.

However, this is a state, Serbia is the state where such things happened and something similar… I thought that, the time period, the early era had a meaning, that we are a civilized society, that some things cannot happen in the twentieth century, that's what I thought. Unfortunately, I was wrong, and that's how the war happened, and I, my husband and I spent the war in the city. We were engaged all the time, he in his workplace and we only left the city in the two-three last days, we stayed there all

the time on our own accord. We were never extremists, neither mine nor his family. We didn't get involved anywhere, there was no reason for us to flee or such, we thought there was no reason. That's why we stayed in Pristina, we were in the city all the time.

Then it turned out that the world had decided differently, the bombings which were harsh and escalated started. We mainly stayed in our apartment, we didn't even go to the basement. We were there only in the first two-three days, then we decided to go back to our apartment and that's where we spent the time of the bombing. However, when all this came to its end, when… because at the table of power, as my father used to say, I only understand him now, however it all ended at the table of power, the Kumanovo Agreement[10] was signed, which was not good but there was no… I know there was no other solution, the only alternative was for it not to get destroyed further. But can we say that I know? I don't know, but that's what I think.

Then real hell happened in Pristina, real hell. After this it was hell, because nobody knew who would make it to dawn, because the airplanes flew all the time, there were thunders, there were bombs exploding in the city and outside of it and there were thunders in the sky during the day as well as during the night, they didn't stop. But I always went to work well dressed and with make up as if I was going to a ball, as I always did. That felt as a need and that's what I did, as if everything was normal. However, the real hell started after the Kumanovo Agreement, because a dark power rushed towards us out of nowhere, I don't know out of where, people rushed from every corner, some unknown faces which seemed were coming from under the ground. I suppose they were from Albania, Macedonia, the villages, we were grabbed from every corner, abductions, killings here, massacres there. It turned into a real chaos.

I was there until the last day, I was in the city until the 29th of June and I think that after the signing, I mean, the worst period was the one between the 10th and the 29th of June, it was really harsh but he didn't believe that it would happen, that we would have to flee. He said, "You're exaggerating, you're just causing panic." However, it was evident that we couldn't handle it anymore and that's when we decided, when I managed to convince him to leave, to flee, also my brother, my father, my sister-in-law, we had to flee and leave everything the way it was. After this I came once to my apartment, because we moved to my mother's since it was across the street just like this building here {shows with her hand}, they were separated by only one street and KFOR was situated there just across the street. We thought we would be safer there since there was the Serbian Ministry of Internal

[10]The Military Technical Agreement between NATO ("KFOR") and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), commonly known as the Kumanovo Agreement, was the accord concluded on 9 June 1999 in Kumanovo that ended the NATO bombing campaign of FRY.

Affairs (MUP),[11] because we only had one street between our building and KFOR, and we could see it from the window. Then we moved there, while our apartment was on the other side, where there were many Albanians around.

I locked the door of my apartment even though there was no one in our building and there were no broken apartments. The two of us were the only ones to stay there during the war. I locked the whole building and all the apartments were safe and no one was missing anything, they all remained the way they were, no matter whether they belonged to Serbs, Albanians or Turkish people. There were Turkish people in the building, this all was okay. But however, when all this happened, we still moved to the other side because the surrounding environment was not safe. We didn't know who was there. We knew who we were, but we didn't know who was in our surroundings.

One day I went to my apartment with my brother and saw a writing in capital letters on my door, "UÇK",[12] with a red pen. I was shocked, what do I do now? However, I attempted to enter courageously, I opened the door and entered. There were… he said he was a neighbor of ours, an Albanian, and the wife of the other neighbor. I guess they were arguing about who will take my apartment and were already deciding. Because they were arguing who will take it. I entered and saw what was happening, I tried to think and I also heard voices from the other apartment, they were also arguing about the same issue, but in Albanian. I forgot to mention why my father said, "I don't understand this Albanian language that you learn in schools, when I say Albanian language and *šiptarski*." They were arguing in *šiptarski* and not in Albanian. The Albanian language is the standard one, while the people speak *šiptarski*, the folk one, the one they always used when they talked to each other. So, there are big differences, it's not the same. They cannot be understood when they talk. As we say now, Croats are close to us, Slovens, or so to say that's the difference.

Next door, the others were arguing too, I could hear something happening. Now, I didn't know how to go out of my apartment, since our car was in front of the building. They could break our car. Now, I was thinking what to do, I tried to serve them a drink without seeming to be worried, I took the drink and poured it in the glass, it was alcohol. I have no idea, I think very fast, my brain works three hundred kilometers per hour, I smile and in the meantime I think how to go out of the apartment without them killing my brother, let them kill me, the apartment is mine, but he was there with me. When we went out, in one moment I noticed, I heard calm in the second entrance, because my neighbors' argument about who would take the apartment, the future ones [owners] translated to me. I just took an old telephone that was close to me, I plucked it off the wall, the luggage was close to the door and I asked my brother, "Take them!" He took them and I threw my keys on the table, but

[11] Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia*, Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova Republike Srbije (MUP RS).*

[12] *Albanian: Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosoves (UÇK),* Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

suddenly I surprised myself too, I told my neighbor, "I wish you luck until I come back!" And went out. We had to act quickly in order to not get killed by them, or be surprised by any of their actions.

Then we walked towards the car and left in a rush. This was a decision taken in a matter of seconds and everything in the apartment was left the way it was. Why let them break the door, I left them the key on the table. Then we moved to Rade's mother, she had already moved her daughters to Serbia. We went down. One who called himself a neighbor, told us how some Serbs raped a girl in one of the beds of his house. Since he was in Macedonia during the bombing, I was wondering, "How could he know what happened in his bed or his house when he wasn't even there?" It doesn't make sense, bullshit, but I acted like I didn't hear that because I've heard many other things after that. I cannot know what happened in my apartment when I wasn't there at the time. Because I couldn't notice it even when I come back to check it. I cannot know what happened. No one can tell me this. I had never seen that person in my life before. He said… he said that he was from the house close to the building where we were living, that there was a house there and he probably was there. I had never seen him in my life before.

The property is not important, we are important and we left. My husband had to come back then. We stayed in our apartment for a few days. I think I visited it once again, maybe not. I don't remember what happened at that time, I don't know. But all the houses were full of people, everything that was inside the apartment remained there. At that time we had already bought another apartment. My husband bought an apartment just on the brink of the war in order to move. However, we didn't move to that apartment and it remained like that. The only thing on which we agreed, however I insisted on leaving, was that there was nothing left for us, just to flee and save ourselves if we could. Because fleeing through Merdare was dangerous, they were already killing, abducting people, there were people who went missing, they would shoot to the queue and trucks. No one was chasing us, no one chased anyone. It was real craziness.

There is a lot to be said. I saw things even before this, there were burned houses with destroyed roofs even before the bombings. There were not many of them, but there were these kind of cases. There are cruel people in every nation, we cannot, no one is perfect, but then hell began, robbery, killing, knocking on the doors. I experienced it in the other apartment, then I moved to the new one. They knocked on my door, "Open it, we will cause no harm to you!" But I didn't want to open. They could break the door and get inside while I was inside. Then I called KFOR. I was shouting, at that time there were no mobile phones, but I saw another woman from the other balcony who was a resident of the other building close to ours, I told her, and she immediately went and brought KFOR. They came, they were all around the building's corridors, the whole corridor was filled with *šiptari,* even the stairs, they would sit and stare who would be the first to enter an apartment. I don't know who told them or where they heard from that KFOR was coming, but no one remained, not even one of them. They all

dispersed. I went with them [KFOR], I was very reckless to go with them, they were armed and I went with them from an apartment to the other, but they [Albanians] were nowhere. Where did all those people disappear?

That's how I saw they picked one up to take him away from there, not to arrest him, he turned towards me and took his shirt off to show me the bomb. I was in the balcony. I told him, "I will drop a bomb here myself, dare you enter after me. I will drop a bomb in my apartment myself before I leave." And that's how we talked about bombs in the presence of KFOR. Of course, I left after that because staying any longer didn't make sense. I was waiting, because I drove all the time, I visited my family, this was all a craziness that I didn't think about. They could put a bomb under my car and I could fly, I absolutely didn't think about this, but maybe no one thought about this and no one was smart. Whatever happened to someone, happened and that was it. Or maybe they all thought they were smart and had agreed with God and nothing would happen to them. So in the end we, I managed to convince Rade and I told him, "Tomorrow we will have to leave. There's no other solution." No one followed us, no one followed anyone, there was KFOR all around in Merdare, they all went on their own responsibility, something could happen to each one of them. So we decided to flee and it was real craziness until we left.

When we left early in the morning, in a matter of a minute they could appear there around the car and simply block it, kill the person and take him out of the car, get inside where there are the keys and leave. Or in the apartment, at our neighbor's, they went to the apartment, knocked and he opened the door and they broke in, they took his mobile phone, there was no mobile phone, it was a kind of GPS or whatever, I don't know. It was not a GPS, it was something that I don't remember now, a kind of telephone. They took, I don't know, every valuable thing, and ordered him to leave the apartment at six o'clock in the afternoon. They took his car keys, because this was safer, he wouldn't be able to drive the car without the keys. When someone was in the car, they would just unlock it and take the driver out or kill him. I saw these, I saw blood on the streets. I remember when, I don't remember who, but someone was killed, there were three people. They were killed in the car, then their car was brought… maybe KFOR had brought it to the center, I saw them, that's when we decided, that's when I convinced him to leave.

I had my brother, my father and my sister-in-law, my niece and one of my nephews in my car. One of my brother together with my sister-in-law didn't want to leave. They remained in their apartment while I left together with one of my brothers and with his old father-in-law. I mean, there were two cars, ours and one in front of us, what would happen to us depended on God's will. I was driving my Mitsubishi so fast, while my brother, he was driving a Jugo[13] and I kept looking at the back mirror to

[13] *The Zastava Koral,* also known as the *Yugo,* was a supermini car built by the Yugoslav Serbian Zastava corporation.

see what was happening to him. Because I would panic when I couldn't see him in the sense of where was he and what was happening to him? Then I would stop for some time, until I arrived in Merdare I had no blood on me.

However, we crossed somehow, we survived, and my Rade at the last moment, when we were entering the car said, "I am not coming." He said, "I am not coming, I will stay. No one is looking for me, what did I do to whom?" There was no time left, I couldn't wait any longer because my family was waiting for me, I was waiting for him to leave and that's how we all got stuck. However, I decided to leave. I left, and he stayed. My brother returned and stayed with him. He stayed close to the apartment and the house he had, the house of his father where they had lived, brother, sister-in-law and father, because his mother had died earlier and he only had her apartment, but still, he [my brother] decided to live with Rade in Rade's mother apartment in order to stay together. That's where they stayed.

My brother was still working at the power plant. Since he was one of them, the power plant was there. As far as I remember, there were around seven thousand workers or more. I don't know how many of them were Serbs. The majority were Albanians, and among all the Serbs who were working there, only fourteen of them were allowed to enter the power plant complex, they were in the register, my brother was one among them. The power plant was located in Obilić,[14] about thirteen kilometers from Pristina. He had to go to the power plant by bus, where everyone around him was *šiptar* and he was there alone. Now the question is, which one of them was an extremist? However, he went to work during the whole July. "Why should I resign? I should not resign like this." Maybe everything will settle down and he will remain employed because he also had children.

However, he went to Blace one weekend and Rade wanted to go with him. I was waiting for Rade because we had to leave for Saint Ilija in Kopaonik and his sister's on August 2, because they celebrate the holiday and then leave for Belgrade or such. I talked to him in the evening of August 1, he called me around 11:30 pm which was unusual. "What are you doing? How are you?" I asked him, "Why didn't you come yet?" Because my brother had came already and he had not, because I was waiting for him. "I will come these days, but be aware that I will go back again." I told him, "Alright, come first, come first and then we will see how you will go back, but first come and let me see that you've came." "Alright, I will come, I will come. Don't worry! I have ways to come. We have some Putnik buses which we hid in Gračanica,[15] so I will come on that bus." I said, "How are you going to come when you have no car and nothing?" Because I had both cars, "Our car is here." I couldn't ask my brother to go and pick him up because it was dangerous for him too. I could not expose him to danger. If he had decided

[14] The name for the town, *Obilić*, refers to Serbian national hero Miloš Obilić who killed the Ottoman Sultan Murat I at the Battle of Kosovo (1389). In Albanian, the town is also known as *Kastriot*, after the name change of 2001, after Albanian national hero George Kastrioti Skanderbeg .
[15] This is the Serbian name of the city, Graçanica in Albanian.

it on his own, he will come, if not, I can't ask my brother to go and pick Rade up, I don't have the heart [to ask him that]. He said, "Don't worry, I will come, I have my ways." "Alright." This happened on August 1 and I haven't heard from him since August 2.

My brother went to Pristina again and saw that he was not in the apartment. My brother had the key of the apartment of Rade's mother and entered even that one, but Rade was not there. He knew, Rade was like that, he would go around all the time, observe, go here and there, and he saw that he wasn't there, alright. In the evening when he went to bed, he had taken the key off the door with the idea of Rade to be able to open the door when he came, because he may fall asleep and not hear him, so he took the key off the door and went to bed. In the morning, the neighbor came and said, "But maybe Rade went to Kopaonik." And my brother calmed down. "He probably went to Kopaonik," there was no mobile phone which he could use to tell someone at that time, no one knew. "Or maybe, maybe he's walking around, maybe he is here somewhere in the city at his friends' or such." She came in the morning and brought some donuts, I don't know, and told him, "These are for you and Rade." "But, didn't you say that he went to Kopaonik?" "I am not sure, I just know…" and at that moment my brother realized that he wasn't there, that he wasn't there the whole night and no one knows where he is.

Then he called my sister-in-law, he called in Blace, we were in Blace because my mother was from Bllaca and we thought we were among relatives there, because we had our paternal aunt's sons there and so on. In order not to feel as foreigners, because the refugee is a foreigner everywhere. No one is welcomed, but okay. Unfortunately, we were not even refugees, we were displaced people within the country, I always think, [displaced] from life. Then he called his wife and told her, "Rade cannot be found and I don't know what to do. Should I tell Olja? I don't want to cause panic, maybe he will be found somewhere, maybe he went directly to Kopaonik, there might've been such long lines, maybe he went to Belgrade for some reason because he had to be in Belgrade at the director's offices of Putnik because the director had called him." It was his workplace, they were waiting for him there, he wanted and thought that he would be able to stay. He says, "I don't know what to do." I heard this and at that moment I panicked because I knew that none of it was true.

Everything started there and I didn't know what to do, I was in such a big shock that I locked myself in my room and no one dared enter, they didn't even dare walk in the corridor, they whispered in order not to bother me. I just sat in my room, I didn't even cry, I was just praying God not to deprive me from a healthy mind. Within a month I lost my city, my apartment, my job, my friends, everything, everything, everything, and now my husband too. Nothing is left, the end of the world. I was just drowning, I was drowning and I didn't know where I was anymore, I just prayed God, "God please save my healthy mind so that children in the streets will not throw stones at me, God save my mind." There was really nothing left, there was no life for me, there was no breathing for me, I didn't know which

was the way out. I was unconscious, when I got my consciousness back it was a horrible panic that I didn't know what was I supposed to do with myself. Then I stayed locked in my room for a couple of hours and then I got back in action.

Then I started calling him, calling his friends and his enemies in Pristina. I knew everyone in Pristina and I had their contacts, but I had nothing with me, my contacts were left in the apartment in Pristina. I was trying to find something out, whoever might know something, if someone could tell me something. I called *šiptare* in Pristina, I called Pristina hospital to see if he was in the morgue, if they had any information, I followed, I went to the police station to report his missing, the Serbian Police in Blace, they are like, "Well, we don't have competences 'down there', so there's no point to write a report." I was going crazy, he should be registered somewhere, he was missing, something should be told to someone, we couldn't simply stay silent. Then I found out about powerful organizations about which I hadn't heard before. I don't know, about the Church Council, this, that, I found out everything about the International Red Cross in Niš. I didn't know these existed, they were all among us and ordinary people don't know about them. These all appeared to me and I started calling, I tried, I reported, copied, sent his photographs by fax, his details. He has a mark here, a mole, some naive descriptions, I only realize now how naive and innocent I was, I wrote everything. I couldn't calm down, I simply had to do something, not to stop, to try to get to someone in order to find something out.

I offered his property, our property, I offered everything to his *šiptar* friend. I offered it saying, "You know what I own, I have the documents, I have the land title, I have the contracts, find him and bring him to Merdare, you will have everything, you will have everything. I will sign them myself but only if you find him alive. Not if he is dead, only if he is alive." He probably was not alive anymore and is not anymore. His friend said, "I know that money is not a problem, I know money is not a problem when it comes to Rade, he would compensate them either way. I know it Olja, money is not the problem but there's no way I can find him!" Then I found out, I found out and I called his friend in Pristina again and said, "I've heard that Syla who was working in the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MUP), is suspected to be a 'loyal'[16] policeman," who betrayed and many Serbian policemen were killed because of him, but I only found out this later, I didn't know. I said, "I have heard that in Germia," which is close to Sofalia, which was a village near Pristina, "there exists a camp where Serbs are kept, where there are Serbs, can you see if there's Syla somewhere around there, the one who worked for the police, maybe he is keeping him there." He said, "I know Syla, he is here sitting next to me." What I am trying to say, I complained while talking to Rade's friend, and he was as much of a friend to the one

[16] By 1991, Slobodan Milošević's legislation made Serbian the official language of Kosovo and removed all Albanians from public service. However, very few Albanians continued working for the Serb-run Kosovo institutions, from both sides they were called 'loyal.'

who worked for MUP, who would notify them where the Serbian Policemen were in action. This only happened later, and I was shocked, I said with myself, who am I to tell someone something, a little worm who's trying to explain something to someone.

It was horrible, one month and a few days later I was in Blace among the chickens and other inhabitants, this was my lifestyle in the powerlessness I was feeling. Then I decided to go, I simply told my brother in the morning that, "Tomorrow I am going to Belgrade." He asked, "Where?" I said, "I don't know where I am going, I don't know. I have no money, I have no apartment, I don't work, I mean, I have nothing, I am going, I will go." I said, "I am going because I have to, I cannot stay here, I am going, I will go crazy, I am here just because I have to be, I am going, I am going to try something, I have to do something, I cannot go on like this." "I am coming with you, alright." He drove me, I decided to go to the Hotel Putnik, because I remembered that during the bombings, Hotel Putnik offered its workers to come and accommodate there. Somehow I thought I would survive until I would find out what I could do.

I came to the Hotel Putnik. Of course I was not welcomed, no matter everything, no matter that my Rade was a professional and Putnik had earned a huge amount of money because of him and no matter that… I always admitted that, "Putnik is his first love, I come next." They told me that the director had said, "You can stay one night and tomorrow…" I said, "Alright, thank you." And went to my room. Then the next morning I went to the executive director and managed to stay there for some more time, I stayed there for four years and I have to admit that I went through very violent obstacles and so on, but I managed to fight, in the end of the day it's not that I voluntarily went there, not just because going there simply crossed my mind, but because it was what it was and it was not my fault, it's not that I lost my property, but they brought me to that situation, maybe someone had to take care of me. Then I took care of myself, I stayed there for four years and I was untouchable because I built barricades around myself, I used some of my activities and at some point I remembered that I could do something for myself, I stayed there. Even though I had a deadline for how long I was supposed to stay there, I shamelessly overstayed, I did not solve any other issue.

I know they didn't love me, but as for that, I didn't love them either. I am kidding, I didn't hate them, but they didn't love anyone who was in the hotel, even though I fought for my place and my status, however we got along well. I mean, no one is welcomed in any place they go. All of them thought I was living a calm life here, but they should've asked themselves once, what would they do if they were in my position? One escapes in order not to meet with something bad that can happen to them, the evil does not knock only on others' doors. I guess this was the curse of these wars, maybe they all think that it cannot happen to them, it can only happen to the other, that it's far from them and it will

happen to someone else, but it can knock on the doors of each one of us, if not this, another bad. I don't know if this was luck or misfortune, but I think this is how it is.

I always… then I got involved in various associations, since the establishment of the Association of Kidnapped Families and Missing Persons, I went there since the first day, I went there since the very first meeting, I had heard about it somewhere, I had read it in the newspapers, I went to the Red Cross and I was active there as well since the very first day, and this is what helped me survive. If I truly survived, I often ask myself this question, because the crazy never admits that they're crazy. The question is how did my mind survive, at least did not go crazy, because I would go crazy from the problems, I could simply see myself drowning, drowning, and there was nothing left, the machine would not stop. I don't even have a straw, I have nothing to hold on to.

I came to Belgrade with one luggage and that was it. I think that for some years one doesn't have time to meet someone else, a friend, to create a circle, to not have someone that would recommend them, someone to say a good word for them on any issue, one cannot find their spot, cannot get employed, cannot… no one will accept them, not even as a saleswoman in a kiosk, for nothing. It's an extraordinarily big nightmare. Desperation. One finds herself in a limbo, that she doesn't know how to tell the difference between night and day anymore, as if swallowed. Everything hurt. Every centimeter of my body hurt. "I wonder what they're doing to him, what he is going through, are they torturing him." When I wanted to do his nails, he would say, "No." I would say, "But I didn't do anything." [Rade] "Just in case." Because he didn't like pain, I wondered, what they're doing to him? I had a kind of cramp, a kind of lump in my throat, and the cramp in my whole body that everything, my whole body was covered with needles, every centimeter of my body hurt because of that pressure, because of the fear of what they were doing to him, but I never heard anything except silence. Then I threw myself in the fire, in the association where I used to work for almost 15 hours.

Nataša Govedarica: In which year was the association founded?

Olivera Budimir: It was at the end of 1999, something like that. Now, it was registered in the beginning of the year 2000. I went for the first time to a meeting with the International Red Cross, I was in mourning, it was winter, it was the month of January, December, but a little later, I had a black coat, I wore black glasses, I had protection, and I saw, I did not know anybody and I saw all those people around me, I stopped by a door, and I saw all those people sitting everywhere: a mother with two children, three children missing, all men, a spouse with two children, or several members of the family. I only looked, I only cried. I did not say even a word in that meeting. I only said, "God, Olja, you are sad, what are you doing among all these people, all these sad people?" I felt perhaps ashamed of all that grief, because so much grief was gathered there.

I left, I was crushed, my spirit was crushed in that meeting, but I returned again to the meeting. Now, I had been more prepared, now I began to ask questions and look for some answers that I knew did not exist, but I asked these questions and participated in every meeting, now I needed to be in every meeting, thus I participated and from this foundation, from the elections, after the mobilization of the officials, from everything, I was everywhere, I registered voluntarily. They say that, "This or that needs to be…" I say, "I want to be there, I will go, I will do it." I mean, not that there was money, we had nothing, we could barely live and later the International Red Cross covered for our space. We got the first decision, a lawyer from the Fund of Humanitarian Law drafted a statute for the organization of our work, because we were in the same meeting.

We went often to them, since we were somewhat closer, in the neighborhood of Slavija, while they were near Avala street, so when we had, when we had no paper, we had no money, we had nothing, we said, "Let's go to them to take a bunch of paper." We sent someone from the association and she sent us a bunch, as if she was someone. In the association we only had a telephone, we did not have a fax. Later I went to a business that was in our neighborhood and kindly asked them, naturally using my charm, any time I needed to send someone a fax. "Of course, you can!" And thus I gave them a fax to send someone or asked them to write it from scratch because we did not have anything, we only had a computer. We bought newspapers, all in a row, and later we took all the telephone numbers, fax and other contacts, later we announce our existence to all the agencies, all the news agencies registered us, published us… thus also the journalists and people began to know us and began to call us, to answer us and this began from nothing.

The first statements are written by people on a paper that I brought with me, that paper with the squares from the municipality. Because when I left, I already began writing the book *Lavirint života* [Labyrinth of Life], but that at that time it was not a book, it was my diary. And I brought some of those papers that were packed in my handbag and on them I recorded the first statements. {Olivera speaks to her coworkers in her mind} "People, when someone calls, we have to do something!" And I used that knowledge of mine from the municipality, from the administration. Then, initially it was announced that one man appeared to take something, data, later write something, later create something, later I saw that more and more people were always announced and this problem appeared. Let's define them, was someone notified or not, later I prepared a dossier for everyone and I diffused it in the city, later in the municipalities, and later we branched out but we had to begin from somewhere. But I worked, namely I held gatherings, protests, to be heard, the city had never listened to us.

Even today there are many who never heard of that and for me it is not clear, there was lack of interest in the kidnapping of Serbs in Kosovo. People were more informed everyday, and I worked, oh God, I worked a lot, and this was very important for me. I did not complain, because while working one does

not think, because you are preoccupied with something. For each statement I had [to gather my heart] pull myself together, because I had to hear someone else's story and go through that story, while I had mine. They were difficult stories, very difficult. I was not allowed to cry and show emotions, but I had to have a kind of mask, the face of a public official, and then at home I let go of everything when I was alone. I could not do it differently, because if you cry, you do not get to have their stories. All this went on, I created a large database and achieved a great success and we were successful in the media and everywhere.

I included all possible international institutions that could participate in some way. But unfortunately many of these institutions were established, I guess the wars bring them. I think that they work as businesses and without any goal to help people. Later I realized that we were used by various institutions, that the only reason they existed were these stories, and actually nobody wanted to do anything because there was no power to do anything, and those who had it were not concerned. So we, but it happened because I worked by myself, I did not give up, I insisted although I knew, but had to force also these institutions to network between themselves better.

Some, for example, worked on DNA ICMP,[17] in Sarajevo, the Belgrade Coordination Centre, the Commission for Missing Persons was then in the framework of this office, so it was a small department. Then there was UNMIK in Kosovo. All these exist, but do not interact with each other in these areas. They collaborate with others but they had to enter into an agreement and tell each other who was the principal, who was not the principal… it was such a procedure when the DNA lab is supposed to be established in Belgrade and we realized that we had this pressure in terms of which institution will be engaged, who will be involved here. Will you be able to, would pathologists come to us, recruit us, speak good words, do we decide, what have we decided. Finally we realized that this laboratory was not working for our people, it will not work, that these labs are of different type. I came to this conclusion the first day, at the opening of the laboratory, I came to the conclusion that this lab will certainly not work, that this was a crime lab, which will not work for Kosovo and Metohija, the one in Tuzla will work for us.

We lobbied, put pressure on the government, we all put pressure to establish this, that this would happen, that we came to our people because we knew that many bodies were lying in the morgue of Belgrade, they should be identified, only to conclude in the end that it will not be at all for us. I was at the opening… I realized that once again I was exploited, they will go to training abroad, and we will stay where we were. There are usually unfortunately such stories, so my involvement lasted some three and a half years. In fact, from the beginning of the first year, since 2000, I knew of an association near Pristina, it was in the direction of Kosovo Polje, we knew that there existed a hall, several large

[17] International Commision of Missing Persons.

spaces and something, and knowing that, when I was there, I registered it as I passed by car and in other ways and there were exposed the belongings of the exhumed bodies. The Hague Tribunal had already excavated the tombs near Pristina, in Dragodan, that cemetery that UNMIK created and they found things of people who were there. We realized this and I decided that they had to show us because they had already shown Albanians and we had the right to see. “You cannot, because we cannot guarantee for your safety.” “You cannot? We will go by ourselves.”

Then I made a big fuss, and I did it personally. I was in charge of the association and did not want to give in, some colleagues of the association disagreed with me. I did it myself and took full responsibility upon myself, I decided to push forward this issue. I said, “Well if you do not want to.” The International Red Cross said, “We are not an army, we cannot defend you.” “Well, then we will go ourselves, God willing, you will be responsible if we die, but we will go!” Then, seeing that we are not joking, that the devil took away the joking, then it was ok. “We will photograph all these things, we will make an exhibition with those things.” I say, “Please, do not ever call this an exhibition. The exhibition is associated with something beautiful, with something nice, this is not an exhibition.” “We do not know how to say it, there is no other word in English.” I say, “There is, call it presentation, preview, call it whatever, but not exhibition. The exhibition deals with photographs, exhibition of paintings, something beautiful. This unfortunately is not an exhibition.” Ok, they approved it and they photographed it for us, and printed it on large billboards and put it up, and created a catalog, at the Gračanica House of Culture, so then we had to go “down there.”

Now there was a desk, families from Serbia and Montenegro were contacted, at the time Montenegro was united [with Serbia]. They were invited and informed of the schedule based on which they were supposed to leave, this or that detail, the whole organizing of that trip. I organized the busses from Niš, Nišexpress, but I knew that before this trip a bomb was put in the Nišexpress. I agreed with the media not to write about this, for this to be kept hidden and for them not to write so that it would happen all of a sudden without it becoming a big deal because we were all going to die. We would go, no matter where they would put the bomb. That’s how it was. I made various registers, I fixed them. I say this, because only I made the callings, the others refused. It’s difficult for everyone to meet the facts. Many families refused to go and see with the excuse, “Mine is alive, I got the information.” I also had black and white information. In the morning I heard he was alive, in the afternoon that he was massacred, and this was the case since the beginning, it was cyclical. I couldn’t ignore the fact that he might be dead, I wanted to see him. This was all fixed and the International Red Cross boosted its operation in order for everything to go the way it should, I even managed to smuggle in a journalist even though it was not forbidden, I announced him as a member of a missing person’s family in order to take him with us.

Somewhat around the evening I left the association, I think I worked in that direction for the whole week, I couldn't even sleep, I didn't sleep at all, and in the evening I am calm as I leave, everything is alright, I take the approval, we are going, everything is alright, in the morning when I leave, not the next day but the day after at five in the morning, I came to the association at eight in the morning and saw a fax from UNMIK on the table where they were rejecting our request for escort. Now we had to cancel everything, all the people who were coming from Montenegro, from Bar, from Titograd, Podgorica, all the people who were coming to Belgrade from all around Serbia. How could we cancel it? How could you ask people to go back? They were already in their vehicles, on their way. Then the panic started, because they rejected our request for escort and we couldn't go, then I notify the International Red Cross again, they decided to help me. They had a director there named Nadine, she was very kind and I had a good collaboration with her. She sent her people, her team, she said, "Ola, we know you are alone in all of this and our people will help you." Then together we called every family and cancelled everything. Now the International Red Cross was the one to ask for an escort for us, not us, because the day before they had been given the confirmation that they could pass, but now they had to gather all the people who were already coming, wait for us, accommodate them in the hotels which weren't nearby. That's how we finished all this process.

Part Two

Nataša Govedarica: Let me shortly remind you what we were talking about just before this technical break. You were talking about the organized movement of the kidnapped and missing persons families to Kosovo and the first day you found out that UNMIK refused to escort you. You were somewhere that day, so I ask you to please try to recall your memories of that moment and describe what happened after.

Olivera Budimir: The International Red Cross managed to somehow, through known people and power, to get this permission, and we left to Kosovo and Metohija, we took off towards Gračanica.

Nataša Govedarica: Was this your first time to go to Kosovo?

Olivera Budimir: The first time, this was the first time I went to Kosovo and Metohija after my migration from Pristina. It was very tiring. One bus left, two buses left, and this happened right after the event when the Nišexpress exploded, when it tread on a mine, after the massacre of Serbian people on their way, we left to Kosovo and Metohija. I intentionally call it Kosovo and Metohija because that's how it was officially called at that time and we couldn't call it differently. Two buses mainly filled with women left. Mainly old mothers, sisters, wives. I don't know if we were the bravest or not, but I saw more women and wives during my time in the association. I was hurt because they

always talked about how hard it was for the mothers, sisters, children etc., etc., etc., they barely mentioned the wives because they are simply wives. There were mainly wives in the association. They were probably looking for their missing husbands, including their lives, their existence, what they were and what they would continue being. This is a deep ignorance and that's what we will talk about, but there were mainly women, wives and mothers, there were no men, I think there were not more than two of them in total.

We left, I was in the front row, in the first bus, in the first seat, because I am the organizer, am I not? And I was going I don't know where. I mean, we were passing by Bujanovac, because they didn't allow us to cross through Merdare, so we went through Bujanovac where we went through an administrative point, three KFOR soldiers took us with a jeep. This was our escort. Two buses filled with women and a jeep with three soldiers on it in front of us. You have to admit it in the right way. We did nothing, we bravely continued forward. We had provided water and food, I had organized to have enough during the way and that's it. This was the new road through Gnjilane, through Bujanovac and Gnjilan, a road which was recently opened and I was seeing for the first time. It was not paved yet, only the land was digged. The buses drove 20 kilometers per hour, they couldn't drive faster because of the dust they would leave behind, it was summer, the buses drove slowly.

We passed by *šiptarska* villages where there were little children with uniforms, I felt bad for them. I don't hate those children, what do they know about what they had been told. The little ones dressed with uniforms showed two fingers to us, the masked ones, misery. Nothing, we passed, we went to Gnjilan. There was a big space, big double tables put on both sides with many photographs and catalogs, and so on. Unfortunately, many dead ones, there were many things there. I walked through those halls because they were all connected to each other, I don't remember it well because I was euphoric and tired, I hadn't slept at all the whole week before because I was nervous whether it would be realized, whether it would have success. I was the organizer and starting from this I had responsibility for those people and myself if something happened and also because of my fear, everything was put together at the same time.

I went from one space to another, I looked at the first photograph, the second, the fifth, the seventeenth, one-hundred-and-fiftieth. I couldn't see anything in all that anymore, they were all the same, because who didn't wear jeans, who didn't wear shoes, who didn't wear… they were all similar, the same, and then I continued, I walked, I stared, stared, and at one point I went out because I couldn't handle it anymore. Damn the consequences, I saw nothing, but nobody came there to see something. We all had came to cleanse our conscience, to cleanse it with the hope that we would find our people there, even if we don't see them, I was the first one to go there for this reason. I already had walked half of the whole hall and I really had no power left, and I had the feeling that I would faint.

At one moment, I saw a photograph with a shirt, it was a Texas shirt, jeans, shoes, belt, all of them photographed in one simple photograph, and my jaw started trembling, yes… I didn't want to believe it, but they somehow seemed to be mine, as if they belonged to me, I felt something and went out right away, I notified the ones who were in charge and whom we had to contact in case we recognized something. I tried to find out what belongs to whom. They asked me some questions about some general details, what's his height, what's his weight and so on, his age, and the woman admitted with her head, "Yes, yes, yes alright." Based on her reactions and what they translated for me, I understood and I supposed that it was him. I still had enough power, even though a photographer had marked him and I still have that newspaper, probably he had noticed my confusion and then they published the photograph in the local magazine *Jedinstvo* [Unity].

However, I got over all that and I got inside the bus as the leader of the group and took care of everyone. The leader of the group… it was not that I was a leader, but since I was the organizer I was obliged and I felt the need for everyone to be protected and I didn't say anything to anyone. Maybe I didn't want to tell it to myself or the others that it could be true, so no one in the bus knew. Two women had recognized the things of their people, but I said nothing to them, that I had seen something, that I have a mark. We arrived in Belgrade, the International Red Cross, they knew, after some time they invited me and arranged to bring me the stuff to Zvečan, his true stuff which would then help me for the other ones. For the other ones mainly, but also for myself, let's say. Above everything, the International Red Cross asked me to take care of them, I said, "You are forgetting that I am part of this history too." I mean, I am so much into this history that people forget that I am not an official face here, but part of the group, but I tried to deal with all these.

We went there, I was convinced that it was not his stuff, that I was mistaken. Then we entered and I talked to the Red Cross representatives who were from Zvečan and we entered the garden, I was cold-blooded with the conviction that it was not his stuff, when one moment on the grass, his trousers, his jeans and his belt, his underwear, his socks, his Texas shirt, everything, shoes. His dark shoes made out of suede material, in the photograph those shoes seemed symbolic, because they seemed to be black in the photograph but they were dark blue, even though they seemed like that to me, because in reality they were dark blue, but summer shoes. My breath seemed to stop when I saw all these, I couldn't breathe. I could smell a heavy odor, but not from the smell, but from the finding itself. The clothes were clean but dirtied with blood like that, I still have them in my mind, because they weren't washed. They were torn in certain parts from I don't know what… my breath stopped and I ran to the toilet, I started hitting the wall with my fists and shouting because I wanted to be alone and be able to let out everything I had accumulated inside me until then. After some time, a woman came and gave me a sedative which I took with wholly aware because I didn't want to make scenes there, "I need no audience, I don't want to make scenes," in order to calm down, and I calmed

down, then we sat in the car and returned to Belgrade, now with the awareness that it was he, it was his stuff.

However, what I saw gave me the confirmation that it was his stuff, but, “Where is he, what happened to him?” Unfortunately, only in this period of my work had I realized how many flaws these organizations such as UNMIK have, there are defects in all of them, which is horrible. Then I thought, “Alright, this is his stuff, but where is he? He is buried in one of those graves under the number “JA ddd,” I guess there “NN” in Dragodan, he fits well there. This is his stuff but is this him or someone else buried under that number, someone who belongs to another history?” I wanted to do the DNA in order to confirm if it was him or not. Of course this needed time and signing of contracts, agreements and so on. All this is a long procedure which I had to wait for two more years to be finished. But people from my association still didn’t know. I still hoped that those were his things and he wasn’t there. I mean, no one from my association knew that I had signs of him, that I had found them, I had seen that stuff. Maybe I wanted to hide this from myself, so that it would remain a secret.

I never talked publicly, I had many appearances in TV and newspapers and everywhere, but I never told this story to anyone because I wanted it to remain buried somewhere and I wanted to believe that there’s a possibility for him to be alive somewhere. I still had hope, hope dies last. Then a lot of time passed. Now, while none of those who had came had confirmed the identity of their relatives, I had signs, no matter that, I just went there to check. Such is life, you never know the result. Alright, all this lasted… for two years, I tried to achieve to a further signal, to sign the DNA, for somehow to make it happen. In the end, it only happened in 2002, when I had a problem with UNMIK again, and there was The Hague Tribunal again, they had dug for the first time. I only found it out then, when I left for Zveçan, because I went there once again after the first time, I notified my brother-in-law, Rade’s brother, I wanted him to see it too, even though I had already seen it. This happened when the Red Cross invited me to go down, on my birthday. I really wanted to avoid going exactly on that date, but then I didn’t know when was it about to happen. Because the equipment was switched on and they said, “We don’t know when the next time will happen.” So I had to accept to go “down there” with his stuff exactly in my birthday.

So my brother-in-law and I saw him, and we confirmed it again and went through the same history again. At that time I had taken with me, I had prepared some details, I had searched in the luggage, in the clothes I had taken for him, which were very limited. There was one luggage for him and one for me, so I looked for some strand or something of his on his jackets. I collected everything in some small bags and put them there so they would be the basis for the DNA examination. Somehow I managed to find his dentist who hadn’t kept records of his patients but he had fixed Rade’s molar, based on what he remembered he reconstructed his molar, so I thought there would be something I could find there who would help me understand something, something that could be compared. When I arrived to

Zveçan, I talked to the pathologist, because he was the one in charge of talking to the families, and when I told him about the things that I wanted to give him he said, “Yes, but he was with no head.” This was the second shock, I already had one shock and this was the second one. This couldn’t be verified. Then we understood he had a fracture in both of his arms. As for the details, I didn’t even dare listen to them, I couldn’t, I had no power. Also, what I understood… where was he found? The long nights before that, while I was waiting to have that second conversation, and to go “down there” I was psychically prepared and then I couldn’t sleep at night because of all of the problems I had, I wrote whatever came to my mind, I could forget at the moment when I was supposed to ask, because of the confusion and problems, therefore I wrote down, alright but where was he found?

If UNMIK had buried him in Dragodan, then UNMIK is the police, it’s not some strawy army or something, but it’s the police, the regular police “down there” that is still today. They had found him somewhere and buried him under “NN” because in Dragodan they didn’t know who he was. “NN” is alright, this and this “JA 42,” we don’t know who he is, but I said that was his stuff, it is likely to be he. Where was that body found? They couldn’t have put it in the hole just like that, but they must find it somewhere, under a tree, in some case, wherever, that’s how I think. We don’t know this. It cannot be unknown, they made registrations everywhere, there is no possibility that there was no registration. Yes, but every police kept that register with them. And, it looks like they did so, I don’t know if they carried it or not, many police officials had changed within the last six months, who had came from different places and then it looks like they have no information about where he was found. I say that if the police found someone under a tree, in a case or wherever, they first had to send them to the hospital for the autopsy. It’s very normal to specify the temporary situation in which he was found, then bury him. This is not something useless. This cannot be like this, I said, “Where is the register of the first autopsy, it must exist somewhere.” I don’t know this, but The Hague Tribunal exhumed him again later.

The Hague Tribunal had registered him as if his autopsy was done, not that his autopsy was done but his torso was opened. But based on the marks that they make in the chest, there’s a register that his torso was opened. This is another shock. It’s a shock. This in fact means taking organs out of the body because that’s how a torso is opened. He was an old man, and his heart and this and that, they should all be documented somewhere. It was known that it was done to him before, because when The Hague Tribunal did the autopsy again, they saw that the torso had already been opened. Alright, it means, it’s not alright, but I never had any response afterwards and I remained waiting for the DNA to be done.

There were other cases, I heard from a woman who had also found her husband in Dragodan among these ones because they had said the same things to her too, she had recognized his stuff like I had, they had given the same description as for Rade. Tall, big, they even said that her husband had an

appendix, I intentionally never told this to her. Her husband had never had such surgery, that's exactly what she said, she said, "It is written here that my husband had appendix while he never had it". I stayed silent. My Rade had had an appendix surgery and had a huge scar from the surgery, because he had suffered from it when he was a child and it was a matter of life and death and his scar was clumsily stitched, that's why he had such a mark. It could be that they made that mistake when they had exhumed each of them.

We will wait for the DNA. Then this lasted for two years and a half because then, when I understood that it is done in Tuzla and not as I was expecting, in Belgrade, as we all were hoping, then I agreed on ICMP testing and asked the ones to whom I was collaborating to do this for Rade because I had the sample. "See, we have something, let's close this." The process started, because we had to manage to agree with UNMIK in order to exhume him, to do the autopsy again. There was an influencing power there, but alright.

At that time UNMIK had told me, while in Belgrade, they said that there's no need to do the autopsy again because it had already been done once and the sample gotten, because the sample already existed but it was sent to Norway and they had to take it back, the DNA could only be done after they took the sample back from Norway, based on that sample. I said, "No, it shouldn't be like that. I want him to immediately be exhumed and take the sample now in order for it to be compared to the sample that we gave," respectively the family, his mother, his brother his sister, and, "not the one that's there. I am not interested in it, it shouldn't be like that, there is no need for it to be like that. It has to be like this and no other way." And I made a big deal out of this, such a big deal that the boss who was here in Belgrade was suspended, I insisted on my [sample] because I didn't know what they had sent there and which sample was sent abroad. "I want the sample to be taken now. If you say that's Rade?" "Yes." "Ok, you take the sample and through this, confirm if it's he or not. I only accept this way and no other way."

It's important to mention that not only I had had problems with UNMIK, but also with my people, because I was opening the road, this was the first case that was taken over and it's always difficult to be the first, because we had engaged a Serbian pathologist "down there." One of them was from Pristina, he knew Rade, but not only for that, but because he was from Pristina, from Kosovo and Metohija, which means, our person, we consider him ours, that he will do this with all his heart, in a honest way, with less deception, there will be no deception, but he told me, "Olja, if I were in your position, I would take that, because it is Rade's one hundred percent." I said, "Alright, if you say so." "I know him, he was my friend." I said, "Alright, let's say that I accept to take that. Let's carry the torso, which they say it's Rade's, and bring it here and leave it in Belgrade morgue, just for it to be somewhere where the conditions are right, or I will pay it myself for the DNA to be done." "Yes, but it's an expensive procedure," he said. I said, "You know what is expensive, a loaf of bread is expensive to

someone while an airplane is simply not expensive to someone else. How much does this procedure cost? What does expensive mean, tell me how much it cost?" I said, "I will pay for the DNA to be done." He said, "But what if it's not him?" "Just earlier you said that it was he, what do I do if it's not he?" I mean, he confirmed that it was he just some seconds ago. What will we do with that torso if it's not he? What will I do if it's not he? I mean, we could only speak this way.

Well, we got over this too, they did it at last, I hope they did it, I was not there, so I cannot confirm anything. The pathologist and the others were present, they did the autopsy which means that for the third time they put their hands in his organs or something similar and they did the DNA examination, I only took the confirmation from Tuzla, respectively from Sarajevo, from the DNA representatives. It was confirmed that he was Rade Budimir. This was not okay, because I agreed, I was thinking to bury him the same day he went missing, because I didn't know when he was killed, when he died, I knew nothing else, I only knew he went missing and I wanted to bury him that day. I got the confirmation, the information that there's no way for them to manage to come that day, that it was all done but they didn't have where to send the documents with the confirmed DNA, they still hadn't signed the agreement between them and UNMIK, they didn't know if they were supposed to send the torso to our government, then to UNMIK government or vice-versa, but none of them had the documents signed between them. Vicious circle.

It was the first time I told this to the representative in Sarajevo, "You know what, each time you said, 'I understand, I know how you feel,' until now, alright, thank you so much, now I will tell you what I always say, don't try to understand because you can't, I wouldn't be able to understand either. You can't understand, but you can do what needs to be done, but don't try to understand because it's hard to be understood, no one can understand unless they feel it on their skin. But now, for the first time I want to tell you, I want you to understand, as a curse, I intentionally said it for the first time because this is not my way of speaking, I want the same to happen to you in order to understand." After a short period, even though the time period is irrelevant at this point, this all got fixed up, all what I said and then I received the torso in Merdare, received it again. We agreed on the time when I was supposed to receive the torso, I had organized everything here, I had already agreed for the funeral and I had to go, I had to wait for the coffin to cross the border in Merdare.

In the evening I talked to the pathologist by telephone, he was living in Kraljevo, or in Kruševac, I don't exactly remember, he was living somewhere there, "Doctor, how can I know that they are sending exactly him?" Not to mention that I knew there were many errors, "How can I know that they don't take the first plastic bag that crosses their street and put it in a coffin and send it to me, how can I surely know this? I always need to agree and nothing else." He said, "I guarantee about this issue, I will be there when they put it in the coffin, the torso will be locked in a sealed metallic coffin and we will come there as well." I am telling you in a calm way, "at least this." He knew, because he was there

during the autopsy and he knew which one was Rade's torso. In the morning I went to Merdare with my family, unfortunately one has no friends when one is suffering. Maybe it is like that, maybe I don't even know how it is, we were left behind, but I had my family, my brothers were there and so on. We arrived in Merdare. Two of the cars were mine, there were three cars that came. They all went out and walked around, I stayed sitting in the car, and got myself covered in a way not to listen to anyone and not to see anyone, I got inside the car and waited there. Minutes passed as if they were a lifetime, there was no way for the truck to arrive, that car, I didn't know what they were bringing it with, they just knocked on my window. I raised my head, I saw that the pathologist was close to my car. I said, "Doctor, what are you doing here, weren't you supposed to be on the other side with the escort?" He said, "I am doctor…" I don't remember the name, professor, doctor, "Can't you, how can you talk to me like that." I said, "Doctor, at this moment I am only Rade Budimir's wife and I am asking you what are you doing on this side of the border when you were supposed to be with the escort on the other side. You told me this." Of course he continued and declared me an unreasonable person and that I am not… I don't know, this kind of things. I didn't hear those things, my brothers told me later.

After some time the truck came and we escorted it with the cars to the hospital of Kuršumlija. Then, such a digression, such a game of destiny. I was taking him to the exact hospital where I was born, because that's where my father used to live, but there was a basement in the hospital of Kuršumlija, an uncomfortable and bad hospital but this is irrelevant. What was the worst, a tradition which was far from the Serbs' one, as if UNMIK weren't able to afford the expenses, the torsos were not in a tin coffin, but in a simple wooden one. It obviously was sealed with duct tape in two spots over the coffin, and that was it. Probably the cover could be opened. It was covered in duct tape, what was the worst part was that from that car, they carry [the body] from the coffin to a plastic bag, then from the plastic bag they put it in another coffin which is supposed to be brought by the families.

This was a *šiptarski* tradition, a Muslim tradition where the coffin must be taken back because they borrow it from the mosque and they have to take it back. They also had taken the coffin back, but I had brought the other one, not I, actually the Funeral Agency had brought the sealed coffin out of tin material, then they carried [the body] in that white plastic bag and two policemen walked behind the coffin. There were blood marks, it could be seen in the upper part, you could notice that the whole body hadn't decomposed yet, even after two years and a half, three years and a half. The whole body was there, except the head. You could notice when they lifted it. Horrible, it was a horrible moment. I was there all the time, then it was sent to Belgrade.

The next day we buried him in the Orlovac graveyard, two thousand people were present during the funeral. I didn't see them, because I couldn't see anything, but they told me later. They said, "We were wondering who was there from the public officials because there were so many people at the funeral." There were people gathered from all around Serbia. I did not make any announcement, I had

published a small obituary in the newspaper and that was it, because I didn't have the possibilities to notify people. But he was such a human being, I mean, one is as good as many people are present at one's funeral. And there were many people honoring him in his last minute, it was an enormous funeral. We buried him and that was it. I don't know and I will never know if it was he for real. I try to run away from it, I refuse to think about it, because this thought attracts me, but I asked people whether I had the right to do the DNA examination again when I reached this point, and ask for the re-exhumation, I would even pay just for it to happen. It's not a problem paying for all this, it would calm me down, is it he or not, but when you stay silent like this, someone else might be looking for their relative and maybe it's exactly Rade laying somewhere and there's no one who can identify him because he had been delivered under that name already.

I mean, these are heavy stories that are folded one after another, but I still have in my hand everything I did in collaboration with UNMIK. They had kept those notes, those books so carelessly. One name, one case, I am sorry to call it this way but they had all unfortunately become cases and numbers, and when a number is noted for the first time, it should follow all the way until the funeral. He had three-four numbers, each of them different, and he was not the only one, because I compared them with the other ones that were taken over, because I had the notes that I had taken from various sources in UNMIK "down there." They don't even know that I have them, and I am not allowed to bring them out, to tell about them or publish them, because I will cause a big confusion. I don't know if I am allowed to stay silent.

All of those who had received the torsos would ask for the exhumation. And those who hadn't received them, maybe would keep searching, but they would never find their relatives. This is a great vicious circle, can we all go around that dance, it's scary, the pot is boiling, it boils, and the people who had found their relatives somehow have found some peace for themselves, should we really scratch their scars? And the ones who will never find their peace because they will not find their relatives, should we leave them in their ignorance forever? These are great topics. I am not sure, I don't know whether I will ever do that. I just said it now, but whether I will do it or not, I think that… I don't know, I don't know what's good, I don't know what's right, I don't know, I am not sure.

The only thing I know is that I don't know why this happened to him and the others. He didn't owe this to anyone, it hurts and it kills me when I hear from other people that these crimes were committed towards innocent Serbian victims just after the war came to its end, after the signing of the Peace Agreement. Why kill and chase when they had taken what they wanted. I know that before this it was a battle for allegedly the defence of their cause, but why after, ninety-nine percent, or ninety-five, not to say ninety-nine percent of the victims were after the KFOR kicked in, after the signing of the Peace Agreement. After they had taken the territory, when they had already taken what they wanted, even though mainly through an international intervention, then people were killed with terrible tortures.

Why did they have to do this? This doesn't make sense. It weighs differently, killing during the war, killing for self-defence, killing, and differently killing just like that without any reason. To massacre someone without any reason. I cannot understand it by any means, and second, this is revenge for some of their victims.

If we look at it all, then Serbs should've taken revenge. There were always Serbian victims, and it dates since when I talked to you about my father and even before that time, Serbs had always suffered, they were always killed, expelled, they always fled their hearths and whom did they take revenge on, why? We were still living in our houses and waiting for this to pass and the situation to calm down. That is to say, it was not even revenge, it was a need for revenge. I can accept everything, but my soul cannot accept that someone tortures someone, someone has the right to kill someone else, I don't understand that. The whole earth is not worth a human's teardrop, a human's life. I don't understand the need of taking a life on behalf of a whatever ideal. I still don't manage to understand that. The moment his life was taken, mine was taken as well.

Nataša Govedarica: How does your life look like today?

Olivera Budimir: Exactly, that's the problem. I remained stuck in that part of history when all that hell started, not that I don't want to, not that I don't have the strength or the will to get out of it, but because it's like that. Because one is put somewhere wrongly, unfairly, without their merit, without their fault, and we cannot get over it just like that, we cannot get over it no matter how we behave, and no matter how aware we are, there's nothing left and like that. It doesn't come from God, it's not natural, it's not normal.

I constantly try, I've organized a life for myself, I have my own apartment, I am not in the streets, I've worked, I've earned enough for a modest living, I am financially independent, that's it. Material things can be gained and lost, it doesn't matter at all. I never talked about how much I've lost in the material aspect, I never talked about it because that's irrelevant compared to the loss of life. But my life got stuck somewhere there, there was a full-stop put there. Then, based on the fact that the full-stop was put, this is the story where I told that the ones who suffer are mainly mothers, sisters, while the wives only allegedly suffer. It's not like that, I've lost my husband therefore I lost my right to create a family, I lost my right to have the inheritors of my life, I lost my life. Not only one life has been destroyed, but much more than that. This is the scale of the victims, of each victim.

This carries with it much more than the loss of my husband. Yes, I lost my husband, but I also lost the right to be a mother, to be a grandmother, and everything that comes after, with the fact that he went missing. You know, my life stopped there, because life, my home was in Pristina, my life was in Pristina. I have an apartment here, but I don't have a home, it's not a home. Home is where the family is, where there are creations, where there are plans, where… my apartment is, I am thankful to God,

because I have a roof over my head and I don't need to pay any rent, but it's not a home. Everyone says that it's so good, it's well adjusted, that… to me it's random. To me this is simply a place to sleep at, to eat at, to wash, but it's not a place to have a living at. This is not a living.

But, from all of this, this novel is what came out of this whole story, it's *Lavirint života* [The Labyrinth of Life], I am the labyrinth of life, Rade is the labyrinth of life and there are more, unfortunately there are more like Olja and Rade who went through the same hell we went through. But I was the only one to feel the need to write while this was happening, because this was a kind of psychical nurture. I wrote in order to not go crazy. Writing was my companion in the morning, in the night, when I would wake up at four o'clock, when I couldn't sleep, at two o'clock. When there were various thoughts crossing my mind, I wrote everything, I kept a diary. It's my diary written for myself, not for the public, not for the others, I started writing just before the war, when I was fighting for motherhood. It was supposed to be a beautiful novel, a kind of beautiful hymn for my child, simply to give strength to other women who were fighting for their wishes. That's how it all started.

Then the war started and I simply continued writing. I continued writing while the bombs were dropped. I put all of this emotion in the writing. I continued writing while I was in the hotel, while I woke up during the night, while I ran here and there around the association. I only wrote, wrote, wrote and then calm came to me after I buried him, when I… If I had found him, when I found a kind of calm. One moment I remembered my novel, my notes, my diary and I understood that I wrote the last pages when I buried him. That's the time I finished writing. I didn't feel the need, everything was unimportant after that and it ended up there.

So one day, I decided to transfer them, to rewrite them, I earned a computer of mine, which was the first thing I took, because I didn't even have an apartment of mine, and this only through the International Red Cross, because when we delivered donations and other stuff I would usually not take anything. I didn't have any place to put them and I didn't need them. That is why at that time I asked myself what I wanted to take, a sewing machine, or something similar. I said a computer. "But this is not on offer, we cannot give you that." "Well, provide that, I want that, I need the computer because I want to write, I want to rewrite what I have already written on paper and I want to edit it." They went, they were probably still counting and I earned the computer and many more after me [did], because I tried to let them know that not all of us were miners, workers, tailors. Some of us are intellectuals, some of us want to do something else. This shouldn't be a commercial activity, in order to be able to deliver donations. Alright, to me it was a commercial activity, I wanted to write books. I found a formula and said, "This for example, someone wants to write a graduation thesis, someone else wants to write something else."

However, they valued my need and I earned a computer even though it was very difficult for me to rewrite everything, to go through all of my life once again. I forced myself, "I will write five pages today, today I will write three pages," and I had to write until I would write all of it, I will not stop, my soul knows, I have to go through all of them. I had forgotten many of the things I had written. Many of the events were intense, there were many things, many events, and if I didn't put all of them there, they would simply get erased from memory. Then, as I was going through them, I kept saying, "This event, this happened, this happened." I actually knew it had happened, but I had put it somewhere in some corner of my memory and I didn't have it anymore. Then I rewrote all of it and decided to publish it. I fought with myself, "Am I right? Have I got power? This is my personal story, Rade's story, would Rade agree?" But Rade knew. I had read some pages to him while he was alive, the pages where I talk about motherhood, and he didn't protest. Why protest? Then I decided to publish it. It was an important moment to me, I got caught thinking how the work would go, did I have enough power to stand behind it. "I have to stand behind every word, every statement, behind all of what had happened. Could it betray me, will I be able to handle it?"

There are always people who like it and people who don't, there are various comments. But I decided at last. I felt a kind of relief when it went to print and I received the first copy, as if a stone had been removed from my body. Because when the publisher said, "This is gone with the wind now, this is already printed, there is no turning back, it's all done," at that moment I understood that now I had no chance to say yes or no, it was done, "It's a closed chapter which I have no rights on anymore." Now this was a story that came out to the public. I was surprised myself, but I felt way more relieved because it felt like it has fallen from here. I had put some photographs of that period of our life there. Some photographs of our first trips, then the other part of our work in the association, then my work and my meetings with various people, with Đinđić,[18] the Prime Minister, with the president of The Republic of France Jacques Chirac etc., with various leaders and so on, and in the end the basement when I delivered the torso, where all of the suffering and desperation together can be noticed. See, this was it, this is all, but I had to put it here because here you can see all that happened before that.

Namely, this is the greatest monument I managed to build to him. As for the one that is built in the graveyard of Orlovac, it can be demolished just as the one in Pristina, just as my mother's in Pristina was. That is something material, while this is both material and spiritual at the same time. This book travelled all around the world even to Australia and America, also around Europe. It travelled all around, even if the end of the world happens, one will remain somewhere and Rade and Ola will continue living. I think this is something no one can ever take from me. I am so proud for having had

[18] Zoran Đinđić (1952 – 2003) was a Serbian politician who was the Prime Minister of Serbia from 2001 until his assassination in 2003. He was the Mayor of Belgrade in 1997, and long-time opposition politician and a doctor in philosophy.

the courage to express my opinion and write it the way it truly was. It has no political influence, it's not nationalist neither it is national. It has no colouring at all. It's only human, a random human story, how one suffers, how a random person is put in a situation without deserving to be there, to suffer within, to get out of it, and to survive, only for some greater goals of someone of whom I have no idea and is still not clear to me.

So, it's simply a random human story. They say it is a love story, the love story of me and Rade. They also say that it's marked in various ways because people in Belgrade didn't know how we in Kosovo survived. I am glad that they are able to understand it from this, because this is simply a random human story of a life. This novel is pretty spread, because I presented it in Stuttgart, at the Consulate, at the fair, it's pretty spread, even though now I have to print the second edition and I need money again and it all is a bit… but fine. Then I received many thanks for what I wrote, for my work. I say that the novel wrote itself, because life wrote it, but maybe it appeared that way, in order for anyone who reads it to feel like they've been through that story. This novel carries within itself the weight of the moment. What happens in a moment and is written in a moment cannot be repeated. Now that I talk about this topic, this story sounds kind of soft, it doesn't have the power. But it was told in the same way here, only in the time when it happened, and it has the power of the moment. And this is one… it's very powerful, and one goes through it while reading it, experiences it and the hardest part is making someone experience it in order for them to understand it, to put themselves in a certain position, and this was it.

I got a bit encouraged and that's how I wrote the second novel, *Put oblaka* [The Way of Clouds], but this is a different novel. It's a roving novel, a novel of travelling, there's also a love story there etc. Since I am into mountaineering, we camped through Europe and visited many different things, castles and everything, I've written and overwritten all these and of course I've adjusted all of them in order to create the second novel which is totally different from this one. But I intentionally wrote and marked the second novel in that way, even though you can stealthily notice pieces of desperation from what had happened, and this is only in some specific cases. But this is not the story of the novel, I just wanted to say that all of us who've been through what we've been through, we have all been marked in that way, it has marked us, we don't need to stay locked, armored, and get stuck there in that story.

We have to move forward. This only proves the fact that there are other emotions that exist in us, some other wishes, some other needs for knowledge and other viewpoints. So, we cannot and we shouldn't allow ourselves to remain locked at a time, be it spiritual because what like has marked can never be changed. But we have to think positively, we have to think farther. We have to keep an eye on the beautiful things. After all this, I've forced myself to look at the beautiful things, not only here, but in general. Unfortunately life contains beautiful and sad things. Both of them happened to me. But I

want to, I can't feel hatred within myself. I have no hatred and I am not a person who hates. I have no right to forget, I remember, but I cannot hate because that way I will destroy myself. Not that I will destroy someone else, I will destroy myself. Hatred destroys us personally, I can never do that.

Let someone else judge others' actions while I write poems. Even though I've already written the third one, I will not publish it, I will probably first publish the one I am working on right now. It will be a wartime love story again. It will be a labyrinth but not mine, just one that I think should be written. I don't want everyone to identify me with *Lavirint života* even though this marked me and they know me from this. I want *Put oblaka* to exist too, something beautiful.

Nataša Govedarica: If there's something you would like to share with us, we are here to listen to you. But if this is all, then we thank you.

Olivera Budimir: I think this is enough because there's always something to add, to remove, but this is the essence. There's so much to be talked about because there are many years. Seventeen years, and many things had been accumulated for seventeen years.

Nataša Govedarica: We were also interested in [your life] before these past seventeen years and we are thankful to you for recreating it.

Olivera Budimir: That was another story, a reckless story, something different, it's a different sadness, but we move forward. I feel bad for one thing, I feel so bad and I've thought about it many times, why people feel the need to cause harm to themselves, to the others. Why do they feel the need to hurt the other. Why do people feel the need to deny someone's happiness. Simply, I will never understand this, I don't know. I sincerely wish that the person who was looking at Rade in the eyes while he was dying never forgets that and he turns in his bed and remembers that. I waould never like to meet him, I wouldn't like to know who did it, because I wouldn't like to remember his eyes, his face. I wouldn't be able to sleep with that image. Even if they said, "We will do whatever you want, whatever you think, we will give it to you," I would still do nothing. I wouldn't be able to even slap him because I am not that kind of person, because I was not taught to hurt anyone. But, sincerely, I wish he never forgets his eyes, his kind eyes. Because I believe that he didn't believe it even in those moments while he was dying, he thought that however it could be a joke, it was not happening.

Nataša Govedarica: Thank you again.