

## INTERVIEW WITH LALA MEREDITH-VULA

Pristina| Date: July 22, 2016

Duration: 57 minutes

Present:

1. Lala Meredith - Vula (Speaker)
2. Lura Limani (Interviewer)
3. Noar Sahiti (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

*[The interviewer asks the speaker to introduce herself and talk about her childhood. This question was cut from the video interview.]*

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** I am Lala Meredith-Vula, I was born in Sarajevo in 1966, Sarajevo in Bosnia. My father is a *gjakovar*<sup>1</sup> and my mother is English from England, they met because my mother studied Serbian language and they met in Yugoslavia, ex-Yugoslavia, and then they got married, my father was at the Faculty of Architecture in Belgrade but then took a *term* [in English] on Ottoman [architecture] and he was based in Sarajevo, and I was born in Sarajevo.

They lived together for four years, then they divorced and I returned to England with my mother in 1971. And there I didn't speak Albanian nor English, I only spoke Bosnian and I started learning English, then I forgot Bosnian and when I turned 16, because I am speaking *forward* [English] that...I came to Kosovo again and met the whole family. My father, I had three other sisters from my father because he got married again, but I didn't know how to talk to them, because they didn't speak English. I had some cousins who spoke English, who spoke English and Serbian, and I spoke no other language but English and we made pantomimes in order to communicate.

But I was pleasantly surprised by the culture, it was 1982, I was pleasantly surprised, you know, by the culture, despite the political situation back then, in '81, there were demonstrations. Some of my paternal uncles were in prison together with Adem Demaçi,<sup>2</sup> I mean, I had a rather political family, and I noticed some energy for freedom, I noticed it, you know, and it pleasantly impressed me. And when I was 16 I thought about finishing school in England and coming here after school and graduation in order to learn Albanian and be able to talk to my paternal aunts, paternal uncles, my father, mainly my father, because I felt bad about not being able to talk to my father and sisters.

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<sup>1</sup> *Gjakovar*, a term that refers to people coming from Gjakova.

<sup>2</sup> Adem Demaçi (1936-) is an Albanian writer and politician and longtime political prisoner who spent a total of 27 years in prison for his nationalist beliefs and activities. In 1998 he became the head of the political wing of the Kosovo Liberation Army, from which he resigned in 1999.

And in 1988 I graduated from the Faculty of Arts of Goldsmiths, London University, and came to live in Kosovo, it was September, 1988. And as far as I remember, because I came and I told my friends in England, "I am going to Kosovo." They said, "Where is Kosovo?" How did they not know where a country was! And back then Slobodan Milošević<sup>3</sup> had... I don't exactly know but it was, he wanted to change his plans about Yugoslavia, I don't exactly know what it was, politicians and historians know that. And the strike in Trepça had begun, I mean, the strike in Trepça and other problems begun as soon as I came to Kosovo, and it showed in Kosovo, in the news in England and they all said, "Lala went there and we never heard about Kosovo," and it showed on the England and London News. I mean, since... I mean, I lived in Kosovo for three years from 1988, I mean, I saw all the demonstrations, I was in the demonstrations of 1989 here with all my friends, because I finished the third [graduate] level for photography here.

Back then I was in a class for beginners at the faculty, Albanian, a class for beginners within the Faculty of Philology, and by total accident it happened that Rexhep Qosja<sup>4</sup> was lecturing Aesthetics in the same room of the faculty. And I had heard that Rexhep Qosja is a well known writer and teaches Aesthetics, and I hung out with a girl who was a student of Rexhep Qosja and I said, "Can I attend the class and listen to Rexhep's lecture?" And I attended the lecture, she became my best friend, this girl Violeta Bardha, and her father was part of the Action for Blood Feuds Reconciliations<sup>5</sup> in Drenas<sup>6</sup> back then. This happened in 1990, the early '90s. And she asked me, "Let's go because Blood Feuds Reconciliation is taking place, a big gathering," she asked me. And I said, "I am tired." I had my own plans because I was photographing in the villages, because I liked the *kulla*.<sup>7</sup> My father had graduated in Architecture and he had... he went to the villages in order to photograph the *kulla*, and I followed him to make him company, to take photographs of haystacks, of the way people worked in the village.

They surprised me, here they have remained in the past, while in England they do farming and everything else with machines. And it pleasantly surprised me and I wanted to photograph that, when Violeta said, "Come and see the reconciliation of a blood feud," and in the end I said, 'Alright, let's go.' I gave in, you know, because she insisted. When I arrived in Skenderaj, it was March 1990, and there was a gathering, not that big, and I noticed something, I did not understand what the blood feuds meant because I did not know Albanian well, but I understood that it was important by reading

<sup>3</sup> Slobodan Milošević (1941-2006), Yugoslav leader whose ascension to power began in 1987, when at the Communist League of Yugoslavia's Plenum he embraced the cause of Kosovo Serbian nationalists and immediately afterwards became President of Serbia and revoked Kosovo's autonomy.

<sup>4</sup> Rexhep Qosja (1936-), is a prominent Albanian politician and literary critic from a part of Malësia in modern Montenegro.

<sup>5</sup> In 1991 a mass movement for the forgiveness of blood feuds (*pajtimi i gjakut*), was launched among the Albanian population of Kosovo. It was initiated by a group of students, former political prisoners, who approached folklore scholar Anton Çetta and others seniors figures in academia to lead the process. The movement reconciled thousands of cases, and it became a movement for national unity.

<sup>6</sup> Drenas was known at the time as Glogovac in Serbian, Glllogoc in Albanian.

<sup>7</sup> Traditional, fortified Albanian house, tower.

people's emotions. All the villages around Skenderaj and Drenas had gathered, she lived near Drenas. I mean, they had organized the gathering and then Anton Çetta<sup>8</sup> came with other professors. Shëfqet Pllana was there, he was the dean of the Faculty of Philology and I knew him, or the rector of the university (laughs), I don't know, he was a well known person in the university. I knew him, then he introduced me to Anton Çetta. Then I found out that it was something very important and he told me that they were publicly forgiving the blood feuds.

Then I went to some other reconciliations in other places around Kosovo and started getting very interested in blood feuds reconciliations. I started going to villages where they forgave the blood with Anton Çetta to ask them to forgive the blood, I mean, the other groups went before it was publicly reconciled. There was a delegation, you must have conducted interviews with those who were part of the group who went with Anton Çetta to ask them to forgive the blood.

Then I returned to London in the '90s, the late '90s, around December. I met the BBC, and I asked the BBC to make a program about this phenomena that is present in Kosovo, that there are people who forgive this, it was very difficult to forgive the blood. And a director of BBC was very interested, a well known one, and I came somewhere in the '90s, in the end of the '90s, I came with the director of the BBC, we went to Anton Çetta. We went to a blood [reconciliation], we saw a blood [reconciliation]. We went with the delegation and saw a blood being forgiven. The moment when the family decides to forgive it, and Anton Çetta convinced them, it was something, how to say, moving, you know, I mean it gives you emotion, it was something very great to see, to be an eyewitness of something so great.

Then we returned to London and asked the BBC to sponsor our movie. In '91 I came with the team from the BBC, with the director, the cameraman and the soundman, just like you are doing the video now [addresses those who are present]. But back then we did it with a 35 millimeter film, and with the soundman {shows with hands} comes with that, the whole team you know, the director, me, we also had a translator. We engaged Anton Çetta, we asked him where he will be and we found ten families in feuds, we decided to make a documentary film which would feature a family, because you know, English people don't like making a cold documentary, by simply saying this or that, they want to feature some story, some personal story. The idea was to find a family before they forgive the blood and film the moment they forgive it, before they extend the hand of reconciliation to the murderer in front of the audience. And this was the idea. We found ten families in feuds, and the director decided to focus on one family, and we made a movie.

We featured one man from the village of Shkoza in Malisheva, in the surroundings of Malisheva, he had 21 children. Two wives and 21 children (laughs). And he was a man, you know, exactly a man with traditions. And we made a movie about him, his oldest son had been murdered. Imagine, he was murdered by his neighbor! And we filmed the delegation going to the murderer to ask him, then they

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<sup>8</sup> Anton Çetta (1920-1995), folklore scholar, and leader of the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds Movement.

went to the person who was supposed to forgive the blood, and then they responded, you know, they went to intervene in both families until the reconciliation happened. I mean, we followed the whole process from its very beginning. And I was, [it was] a very hard period in 1991, I mean, we had to hide the cameras, we even had to go to Serbs to take the permit for the BBC. They said, “Why, what will you film?” I didn’t want to tell him about Anton Çetta, and I said, “No, we’re making something about the life in the villages,” and we filmed a Serb, a Serbian family, and an Albanian family that was in feud in order to give them a balanced view. Not a one-sided story, you know, only Albanians from Kosovo, but Serbs as well. I mean, more equally represented for the English people, not to see it from only one side, but to see the full view of Kosovo. I mean, we took a Serbian family and an Albanian one and made a documentary.

**Lura Limani:** The Serbian family was in feud with the Albanian family?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** No, no, no, they were not in feud, but they gave... they were just a simple family, and we didn’t compare, we just said this is about Kosovo, here’s a Serbian family. And then we continued with the Albanian family that was in feud and forgave the blood. Only to give a content, a context of the documentary, but most of the documentary film was about blood feuds reconciliation. But, when we took the permission, we said, “It will be with Serbs as well as with Albanians, half-half.” Otherwise they wouldn’t give us the permission to film, they wouldn’t allow the BBC to come. We had to have the permission, a patent. And it was even more difficult because we went to villages by two cars, for example, one car was with the BBC [team] and the other with Anton Çetta. Then the translator, if they catch us with Anton Çetta, they would know what we are doing, you know.

Exactly, this was a trick in order to hide what we were actually doing. And they probably knew, but in the end, each day we filmed, the films came in boxes because they were old. And each day when the shooting was done, we found one who was going to Belgrade and returned to the BBC the day we filmed, because we expected them to take our films each day, you understand? You know, they can, those of Yugoslavia could take our films because we heard they were capable of doing that. And each day we found someone who went to Belgrade in order to leave as soon as possible with the films. This is the story of those who film these, especially politics, politicians always....And when I was in the reconciliation at Verrat e Llukës, on May 1, I was taking photographs there and I heard that they were taking the films away from the journalists, because back then they could take the film and burn it like this {shows with hands}. I heard that while people were leaving the reconciliation gathering, they were stopping the journalists in order to take the photographs and they were especially taking the films. And I hid at a family, I stayed there for four hours until everybody left Verrat e Llukës, then I left alone in order not to be identified by the police.

**Lura Limani:** Before asking you about this, I would like to return to a point that you mentioned earlier, that somehow you started following [reconciliations] by accident?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes... yes.

**Lura Limani:** Were you always taking photographs, did you view your role as a documentarian or just like a participant?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** This is a good question, because I am a painter and an artist, I am not a politician. And I... artists are inspired by their own lives, for example like Van Gogh painted flowers, gardens and everything about Van Gogh. I pictured life around me through photographs, I mean, I went to Blood Feud Reconciliations, I captured the stills I was impressed with, it's not that I thought of advertising it, or writing any article for the news or newspapers. This is very important in my archive, because I didn't do it for a... newsroom or a director or any reason, but for... only for the art. [I captured] what seemed more aesthetic and more beautiful to me and what described the moment better. It is a very interesting phenomena, because I have the archive and it's a document, but it is a very personal moment, which I experienced in Kosovo during those years and now it turned out to be of value for the audience, just like Van Gogh's flowers. Because I am offending Van Gogh now, as if I was on the same level with him, he painted sunflowers, there are sunflowers all around the world, but he painted them with all his artistic sensibility. And I like to try to make art like that with all my own emotions. This was the idea.

**Lura Limani:** What were the things that you learned the most by following Anton Çetta and participating? You mentioned a little that you were there when reconciliations happened. Could you describe the process, how a reconciliation happened and reconcilers...

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, we also have it in the BBC movie that we made, you probably conducted it [the interview] as well, or will conduct it with the students former prisoners....There was a *pejon*<sup>9</sup> woman, I forgot her name, she must be very famous and she told how she was in prison and I mean I was very impressed because she was in prison and saw people in blood feuds who were in prison and that's where the idea came from. And she made [appeals] on the radio, then this big action started. And with Anton, the youth and the leaders of the village always knew who was in feuds. And they selected ten people in feuds, there were many people in feuds, they found ten families in feuds and started asking them, "Could you, do you want to reconcile?" And they called Anton Çetta, Don Lush Gjergji and this... the *hoxha*,<sup>10</sup> since those cases were more difficult.

**Noar Sahiti:** Mulla Xhevat...

**Lala Meredith Vula:** Mulla Xhevat...(smiles) Did you conduct an interview with Mulla Xhevat? He is so good... I mean, going to the yard, to *oda*<sup>11</sup> and ask people to do it, it is so great to ask people because the feuds were big, you know it's something... they went to ask them, *pleqt*,<sup>12</sup> I mean *pleqt* went to the

<sup>9</sup> The correct word would be *pejane*, woman from Peja.

<sup>10</sup> Local Muslim clergy, mullah, muezzin.

<sup>11</sup> Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.

<sup>12</sup> *pleq*, elderly, traditionally the mediators in a blood feud reconciliation.

one who lost someone because of a blood feud. And the cases that were more difficult, they said, “No, I don’t want to forgive the blood, because of course the man is my brother and I don’t want to forgive the blood.” And Anton Çetta begs him, you know, he said, “We are asking you in the name of the Albanian nation.” And since it is Anton Çetta, it is as if Ismail Qemali<sup>13</sup> came and asked you here. You would say yes, wouldn’t you?

Because Anton Çetta was a legend during his life and he deserved it because he talked based on folklore, you know. He says again, “That blood,” he says, “It’s difficult,” he said, “I don’t want to forgive it.” Anton said, “Do you... I remember Isak, Isak with a white horse who came...” (laughs) he has a joke, you know, a joke of the village and a tale, an anecdote. And he entered the world of imagination, the person who was in feuds entered the world of imagination and then he says, “No, no, I don’t want to forgive.” Then he asks him once more, once more... until he says, “You, the *pleq* of the family, go out and decide,” while we, the delegation would wait in the room, we couldn’t even breathe because we were very anxious while waiting for them. And when the family came back they say, “We decided to forgive it,” for example, and we all stood up and hugged, and this is what they did in order to reconcile.

Then they had decided to forgive it publicly and this is how the gatherings were organized. I was in the gathering of the village of Bubavec in Malisheva and I forgot the date, it was April I guess or May, 1990, anyway. That was a surprise because the gathering was organized and everybody came only by word of mouth invitation, I never knew when the gathering started, only when I saw people coming and gathering and it started, Anton Çetta came and it started. The one who always played the *çifteli*<sup>14</sup> in Blood Feuds Reconciliations came as well. He was a famous singer, he always sang, and he came, many others then and it started, people from the village read poetry, then they called every [person] in feud by the list of that village, the family of the murderer as well as the one who forgave the blood. The murderer as well as the one who forgave the blood stood and hugged in front of Anton Çetta and everybody applauded, you know? Because making this Action is very... that is why it was important to do it in front of the audience, as if they celebrated something, the gatherings were organized in order to tell something good. Plus, I guess that it is said in *Kanun*<sup>15</sup> as well that when one blood is forgiven it should be done in front of the whole village, in front of the audience, in order to give the information that the blood was officially forgiven. And this is the tradition of forgiveness in a blood feuds reconciliation.

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<sup>13</sup> Ismail Qemal Bej Vlora (1844-1919), better known as Ismail Qemali, Ottoman civil servant and prominent politician, a leader of the Albanian national movement and a main figure in the Declaration of Albanian Independence in 1912.

<sup>14</sup> Two-string instrument with a long neck, played in Northern Albania and Kosovo, used to play folk songs and epics.

<sup>15</sup> *Kanun*, customary law, the unwritten law that regulates all aspects of life in the mountain areas of Northern Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro. A written version, the *Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini*, was compiled by the Franciscan monk Shtjefën Gjeçovi in 1910-1925.

## Part Two

*[The interviewer asks the speaker whether she had photographed moments of tension between Serbian forces and reconcilers in the Action for Blood Feuds Reconciliations. The question was cut from the video interview.]*

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, I even photographed the whole gathering in the village of Gjonaj,<sup>16</sup> behind us there were seven tanks, tanks of Yugoslavia. They didn't use them, but they parked them there in order [for us] to know who was in charge there (laughs), you know, in order to know who was, you know, who was leading the state. I mean, it was a big psychological pressure and... but, I was thinking about it now, imagine when a soccer [match] is organized with many people, there is always the police needed there in order not to let people push each other or something like that. But imagine there was no policeman [in the gathering], only ordinary people, thousands of people came without a [public call], it was simply organized through one another, with no police keeping the line, only those Yugoslav [tanks] that stayed farther. I mean, the people's organization was very big there, of all people, they had only announced it orally. Imagine, today we have to write the dates on a banner and put banners up, and post on facebook the specific date and the specific hour, we have to set it... But back then they only did it orally, "Come, somewhere in Verrat e Llukës we will organize blood feuds reconciliations." But, there were many people from all around Kosovo who wanted change, you know? Everybody who came to that gathering had the same thought for freedom, for peace, for the better of this place. It was a feeling you could see only on the faces of those who forgave the blood. They were real, you know, a moment. And you and I are young, you don't know you are living history until you get old and you realize, "*Ku-ku*,"<sup>17</sup> I lived in 2016," you know, because many things in your life change, everything changes, you become old and what you lived before remains in the archive you know, it remains in the museum (laughs).

**Lura Limani:** You were staying in Pristina at that time, right?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, I lived in Pristina, I had family in Gjakova and in Pristina. And I became friends with people from the Faculty of Arts and I was connected with the architects and the Faculty of Arts, because I made art, I had a scholarship from Yugoslavia, because there was a scholarship granted by Yugoslavia back then which I gained and I finished the third [graduate] level for Photograph here in the faculty.

**Lura Limani:** How was life in Pristina at that time, were there, was the momentum that was created in the villages with the reconciliations reflected in the life of the Pristina youth?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, it was a stressful life, you know, police everywhere and there was always a political organization and you were always hearing, "This is how it happened, this is how it happened," and we always kept the TV on, "The war has started in Slovenia in Vukovar, the war has

<sup>16</sup> Village of the region of Has, near Prizren.

<sup>17</sup> Colloquial, expresses disbelief, distress, or wonder, depending on the context.



started all around Yugoslavia,” you know, and I mean, there were always many people watching TV, it was a stressful way of living. You know, I had friends who were activists and worked in *Alternativa Ilegale*<sup>18</sup> [The Illegal Alternative], for example they had to hide always, to think about what they were doing, you know? Adem Demaçi was set free at that time and they always came to Adem’s house in order to...you know, they waited on line, everybody wanted to see Adem Demaçi and they went to greet him after he was released from prison. And I mean, we took these things, you know, it was exactly a kind of civil war, because we say, “Will we do it like that, we will do it like that, we will wait here,” you know, we had to always listen, to be careful. Then after ‘90, I visited Kosovo often in ‘91, I visited Kosovo and made exhibitions until the war. I came with journalists, I came here often. While living in London, I always advertised, “Let’s go to film in Kosovo, let’s do something.” I also went often to Albania, I photographed all around Albania, I was there with intellectuals who were for example dealing with history in Albania.

When the war in Kosovo came to its end, I entered Kosovo with NATO troops and worked with the Red Cross in June, 1999. And back then I took artistic photographs because I was highly impressed by the people who wanted to return and rebuild their country. Because I was expecting them to be sad, to cry after the war came to its end, you know, but no, no, people wanted to build their houses, wanted to build a market here, you know, they didn’t choose to be sad for what they had been through, but they wanted to move forward. And this is what impressed me, that is why I made a series that is called, “A jemi të gjithë numër?”<sup>19</sup> Because I heard people using this expression after the war when they met the people they knew, “Are you all a number?” And this is how they found out quickly whether somebody had died or not, “Are you all a number?” “Alright, very good, see you!” And if they said, “My paternal aunt is dead.” “Ok, my condolences!” You know, this is how one counted and while still on the way, “Are you all a number, are you all a number?” People met one another after the war. And during the year I lived in Kosovo, I saw people returning from refugees camps from... there were still mines, it was a mess back then, but at least they were liberated and people were happy, you know? And they knew the value of life, everybody who survived back then found life more beautiful, but there were many people in prison in Yugoslavia about whom they didn’t know anything, so it meant that the problems weren’t over, but like this...

**Lura Limani:** What happened with your family in Gjakova?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, one there, the other here, you know, everybody escaped the way they could. We didn’t know where our paternal aunts were, one of my paternal aunts escaped on foot, she went to Tirana while my father stayed in Pristina all the time. I had one little sister here in Pristina as well as my father, I always said, “Father, escape, escape!” He said, “But, I am old,” you know, it’s not, not....And really, they didn’t care about an old man, because they wanted to kill young boys or send them to military service, but they left old men walk freely. And we survived, you know, my father stayed in a basement with other men, with other old people who remained in Pristina during the war

<sup>18</sup> Constellation of underground militant groups fighting for Kosovo separation from Yugoslavia and unification with Albania during Tito’s Yugoslavia.

<sup>19</sup> Literally, “Are you all a number?” A common expression among Albanians in Kosovo, used especially after the war, it meant, “Have all your family members survived the war?” If the number of the family members counted less, it implied that someone has died during war.

and they stayed here all the time. Then when they left, they told each-other that they might not meet again, but see you, you know, and he lived in Pristina during the war. You know, they spread around... especially in Gjakova, they burned it a lot and everybody spread, they went to camps, some of them to the mountains, everybody went wherever they could.

**Lura Limani:** I would like to go back once again, you mentioned that you came to Kosovo with a Yugoslav scholarship for artists, did you travel around Yugoslavia at that time?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, yes, I was in Zagreb as well as in Sarajevo because I followed arts and theatre, I was in Belgrade as well, I mean, these are the cities in which I visited the faculties of arts and somehow got to know more about the art movements. The first exhibition I made was in "*Hrvatski Likovna*" [Croatian Figurative Arts], the Center for Fine Arts in Croatia, I showed, "*Mullarët e Sanës e Kosovës*" [The Kosovo Haystacks] like this (laughs). And they said that it was a Kosovo statue made out of hay, it was made from nature. And in 1990 I made an exhibition in Croatia and here in *Boro-Ramiz*, now the palace, how is it called, *Boro-Ramiz*?

**Lura Limani:** Palace of Youth...

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, I made an exhibition in 1990 in the Palace of Youth, it was about haystacks, nothing about blood reconciliations at that time (laughs).

**Lura Limani:** I saw the photographs you made at that time, they were very interesting.

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Why, when were you born?

**Lura Limani:** I mean, I, no, no, I didn't see the original ones, no.

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Aaaa..

**Lura Limani:** [I was born] in '88.

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** I was thinking, pretty young to see the original exhibition setting, you were a baby, you were not even born yet. You were born in '98.

**Lura Limani:** No, in '88, in '88.

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** I thought you were (laughs)... you were born in '88?

**Lura Limani:** Yes.

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Aww, okay then you were a baby when I came.

**Noar Sahiti:** Two years old, right?

**Lura Limani:** No, she came in '88.

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** I came in '88, yes. Which month?

**Lura Limani:** July.

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** July, okay that's around when I came, very good.

**Lura Limani:** They are connected.

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, yes.

**Lura Limani:** Yes, I wanted to ask you about what function did the artists have for you, because you probably got to know more of them in Croatia as well.

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, yes, of course. Artists were always against the law, they were for truth, for freedom, for not swearing, not lying. The artists in Belgrade didn't like Slobodan Milošević, nor nationalism either. Hmm but, they news really...nobody went to Kosovo, because I went to Sarajevo and when I said that I was coming from Kosovo they said, "*Ku-ku-ku-ku*, do you know how wild it is," they said, you know, they were intellectuals of Sarajevo and Belgrade, but they still thought that people in Kosovo are savage because that's how it was shown on the news.

And I said, "No, it's..." and sometimes I said, you know, "People in Kosovo are good, have you ever been to Kosovo?" They said, "No." "How do you know then?" Then I took... because Yugoslavs and Serbs had Yugoslav television. And they advertised and the news had shown that, "*Srpski, separatisti, šiptarski separatisti, irredentisti*," [Serbian, separatists, Albanian separatists, irredentists], and they said, "Because this Kosovo wants to split from Yugoslavia," and somehow, I remember even in Sarajevo I said in Bosnian, "No, that's not true," you know, they said, "No, no, you have money in Kosovo and want to separate from Yugoslavia because you are mafia," and many other lies. And yes, then they only realized when the war started in Sarajevo as well how things would be, you know. I am not talking about Serbs, but Yugoslav power or Slobodan Milošević.

Artists were very good and I liked them, but many of them didn't know about the real Kosovo, then when something against [their views] shows on the London newspaper, if it was something that supported Albanians, they said that it was paid, that they did it, that the news that were given about Kosovo were fake. Eeee, they thought that the news were fake. Do you understand?

**Lura Limani:** Was each city very different from the other, I mean you lived in Sarajevo, in Zagreb, in Belgrade, you also lived in Pristina. Did Yugoslavia seem separated even before the war started?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, of course. There were a lot, most of the people had never gone to Kosovo or Slovenia, in Slovenia they were fascinated about Kosovo only by the bad advertising, by the bad propaganda, I am talking about the bad propaganda, they thought that people there were savage. You know, even educated Slovenian people...when I told them that, "I am studying in Kosovo," you know,

Kosovo was a savage country to them, I mean they thought that there was a big difference between Kosovo and Slovenia. Slovenia is very developed, it is like Western countries. And in Kosovo there is a lot of poverty, there are people with horses in the villages, which means that the differences were big, and Zagreb was more like Slovenia, you know. Bosnja was more, Sarajevo was more dynamic, you know, it was more beautiful in Sarajevo because they had even organized the Olympic Games there in 1984, Sarajevo was more dynamic, different from Kosovo. Kosovo was poorer, I mean you had beautiful buildings in Kosovo as well, such as the [National] Library and the Electric Supply, they were very modern, but as soon as you go for example to the village of Marevc, you will find big poverty, I mean it is a big difference.

**Lura Limani:** Yes, how did it impress you, because I suppose that you continued dealing with the arts when you returned to London as well, with photography...

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes...

**Lura Limani:** What did you do when you returned, in fact why did you return?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** I returned because I couldn't find a job here in Kosovo and...I returned to London because I found it there...it was better for an artist to live in London because we had the exhibitions and I continued with the arts. Then I started working as a Faculty professor and I liked working with students. Then...in '95 with the George Soros Foundation, I went to Albania with Soros and helped them found a photography course in Albania in '95. Then after the war I came here and tried to...to help the photographers who were here...in Kosovo, at the Arts Academy and I made a photography course here. Which means that I dealt with arts, with students, as a professor as well. An now I am in Leicester, have you heard about the Premier League, we won the Premier League this year.

**Lura Limani:** Leicester...

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** You added this as well...le...le...les..Lestesqer?

**Lura Limani:** No, we call it Leqester in Albanian....

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Lestesqeri, how nice! E Lesteqeri...Lesteqeri (laughs) Lestër, they call it Lestër!

**Lura Limani:** Yeah, exactly!

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Eh, I am an Arts Professor at the University of Montfort, Movie, Photography, and Arts Professor...and yes...I also have, I am making my own art and I teach art.

**Lura Limani:** Could you tell us any other story during the war, since you entered [Kosovo] with the Red Cross, you probably saw many things...

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, yes many, many things...

**Lura Limani:** What were you focused on, where did you go?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** We were... first we were more focused on elementary schools because in the beginning we... we came to analyze what we should do, because English people donated 12 million pounds to the Red Cross. The Kosovo war impressed English people a lot, we made a lot of money in the Red Cross from donors... *donersit, donors a?* Donors. And... with that money we went to Kosovo to analyze what... what, where... would we spend that money. And we decided to focus on elementary schools, to build elementary schools because there were children and... we went and selected many elementary schools where we invested that money. We also had the office... I worked in the beginning, then they didn't need me anymore, because I was from abroad and they wanted to hire Albanian construction workers and Albanian translators, and they started to build elementary schools. My impression, when I came to Kosovo after war, was that the ruling power and the soldiers had used the schools as a place where soldiers stayed in the villages. Wherever there were elementary schools in the villages, that's where Serbian soldiers were, and they took people and tortured them there. I mean, they even burned, they burned the... office of the... director and the libraries of the elementary schools, they had the same system in every village, to burn the office of the director and the archive as well as the books and the registers.

It was their system, a kind of ethnic cleansing, they wanted to burn the office of the director, the archive as well as the registers and the books in order to leave the classrooms empty. "Go to the school, burn the library and leave." Like this, because you cannot see what they are doing during the war, you can only see what has remained after the war as a testimony, this happened here, this happened here. And of course it was sad.

**Lura Limani:** Were you taking photographs?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, yes, I have an archive.

**Lura Limani:** Did you archive the school photographs as well?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, I took photographs of everything I saw in every school, for example the director's office burned, I have the burned blackboards, the burned chairs. Imagine, why burn the school of the children? You know, I took exactly the photographs that describe the foolishness of the war. Let's not talk about who did them, or how many are dead, but isn't it a foolish action to burn the school, what's the benefit of it?

And I mean, I saw a lot, I wandered a lot, it was dangerous because there were many mines. And one day we, a mine had exploded near us, not very close but a kilometer from us, two boys from Gjakova had lost their legs. I mean, it was dangerous, you know, even the places where I photographed, maybe the moment, I was always afraid I would explode, they said, "No, don't go there because of the mines," because you know, you need to take interesting stills for a photograph, like this...

**Lura Limani:** Did you exhibit them abroad in England or somewhere else?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, I exhibited them in England, I also made a movie about post-war. I made a movie with those photographs which I screened in Dokufest in 2010, in Dokufest. I made a movie with a composer who did the music, and it was during the war, everything I photographed after the war, everything I found, burned schools and happy children. You know, because they returned to their place after the war came to its end and I mean children were traumatised and I saw that they were traumatised, but they were also happy because they were alive and they survived the war and the war came to its end, this...

**Lura Limani:** Could you tell us a little about your life in England? You came... how old were you when you came?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Five years old.

**Lura Limani:** A... you came for the first time when you were five...

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, to England... Sorry, are you talking about here or England?

**Lura Limani:** You went to England from Sarajevo?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes...

**Lura Limani:** Do you remember the war in Sarajevo?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, yes, yes... I was a child and it was very different from London. I really remember horses, I remember the neighborhood where we lived, I still have friends in the neighborhood and the street where we lived in Sarajevo. And I still have many connections in Sarajevo and....When I grew up in England I always felt the connection with Yugoslavia and with Kosovo... I didn't even know much about Kosovo politics when I was a child, but I thought I was a Yugoslav. You know? When I came to Kosovo in '81 I found out that I am not Yugoslav, I didn't know it, but when I met an Albanian before meeting my family, "See," he said, "don't say that you are Yugoslav, but say that you are an Albanian." And he said, "I am an Albanian!" He taught me how to say, "I am an Albanian!" When I met my family, I said, "I am an Albanian," they were very happy, you know with... ueee {onomatopoeic} they were so happy with only a few words, you know (laughs). That is where I understood the passion, you know this is what it means to be from somewhere, the origins are strong, the blood is stronger than water.

**Lura Limani:** Did you only realize later after you came how complex the situation here was, or did you start realizing it earlier, before deciding to come and you didn't know?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes... hmm we have an English expression, Balkan and Balkanize, it talks about the people who separate and it doesn't go well. In Balkans there are not so many people but they still

have arguments, I mean, Greece and Turkey, these are countries with many people, many *fise*,<sup>20</sup> which means that I knew the bad reputation of the Balkans before I came. Plus the First World War started in Balkans, I mean it's really a messy place. I knew that the situation was complex, but I was not interested because I was... I am an artist, and just like all artists I was focused on my own art, we are not politicians, we are not historians, we live in our dreams more like Van Gogh (laughs). I am offending Van Gogh again...

**Lura Limani:** Yes, no, I am asking you because that was the time when you returned, your first contact with your family, you said it yourself that you had no idea you were Albanian, but Yugoslav, so...

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes...

**Lura Limani:** It is interesting to see how you created that relationship with your family.

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, I have... I didn't question it and didn't think about it because I am here, you know, and I didn't say, "Why am I not English or American?" But I am like this, and I have this heritage. I only knew that people were very warm and I liked this a lot. And the family was big, because English people had families with only one child, you know, small families. I remember it when I came for the first time in '82, there were many children in the yard, family, and I thought they had invited our neighbors, the children of the village, and gathered there. And I said, "Let's do it, can you draw the family tree?" "This is my paternal uncle, this is a cousin..." I said, "*Kuku*, all this yard are people from my family?" I thought they had invited the whole village, but no, all the children in the yard were children of my paternal uncle, the children of my paternal uncle's children, each person had five children. My father, three of my sisters and I came, I mean we made a family tree, and many cousins were there, there was I, I {points to herself and her relatives}... I was connected to all of them and I felt good... plus warmth, plus passion. Because we are an oppressed nation, back then we were an oppressed people and we loved... we loved freedom more than anything else. And if you asked someone in Kosovo, "What do you want?" They said, "I want freedom." They didn't say, "I want [Air] Jordan sneakers or Adidas, or this and that..." They said, "No, no, I want freedom," even when children were asked, they said, "I want school, I want education," they said it themselves, freedom, education, not Adidas or this and that...

**Lura Limani:** The University was still in a [private] building [home schooling<sup>21</sup>] when you came to Pristina, right?

<sup>20</sup> *Fis* is the Albanian exogamous kinship group that like the Latin gens includes individuals who share an ancestor. *Fis* can be defined as a patrilineal descent group and an exogamous unit whose members used to own some property in common. Membership in a *fis* is based on a common mythical male ancestor.

<sup>21</sup> By 1991, after Slobodan Milošević's legislation making Serbian the official language of Kosovo and the removal of all Albanians from public service, Albanians were excluded from schools as well. The reaction of Albanians was to create a parallel system of education hosted mostly by private homes.



**Lala Meredith-Vula:** The faculties were in [private] buildings, the Academy of Arts was, it was not where it is now, but it was, it had a spot... because the University of Pristina was founded in the '70s I guess, there was the Academy of Arts, there was Musli Mulliqi<sup>22</sup> I guess, there were some famous paintings by Xhevdet Xhafa.<sup>23</sup> Plus my father was an intellectual of architecture, that is why I liked it, we knew each-other because it is a small place and a place where everybody is connected to each-other.

And back then, when my mother in the '60s... Imagine my mother married an Albanian in the '60s, but they were living in Belgrade and when she told them that she was marrying an Albanian, people in Belgrade said, "*Kuku, kuku* are you crazy?" Because of the bad reputation and propaganda, everyone said, "Kosovo people are savages," but my mother said, "No, I will marry an Albanian." And then I was born, they created me...

**Lura Limani:** You said it earlier that you come to Kosovo often, are you connected to people here?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, I have connections with many people, I would even like to ask you not to tell that I am here, because I don't have time to go to Gjakova. I am sorry I cannot make it to Gjakova this time, because if I do I will have to drink 1000 teas, 1000 coffees, they are all very good, very warm, do you understand? It is a fight over where I will sleep in Gjakova, my luggage fights from the station, "You will sleep at my place, no at my place, no..." and you know, I am not going to visit Gjakova this time because I am doing things here, and next time I will make a visit directly to Gjakova. And I am saying, I hope they will not post it on Facebook that I am in Kosovo.

**Lura Limani:** We will not publish it, we will not publish it right away...

**Noar Sahiti:** After you go...

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** No, because then they will say, "Why you came here and didn't come for tea?" I mean in Gjakova....No, yes... what should I say?

**Lura Limani:** Before finishing, I would just like to ask you, are you working on any specific project?

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Yes, I continue with my art and I want to make more exhibitions plus I am looking at my archive which I've done back then, because as a photographer you take many shots and you never know what you have. But you put them into the archive and you continue with your life because you have no time to look at what you did last year.

And now I am looking back, I have all my photographs in negative [film] because they are very safe

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<sup>22</sup> Muslim Mulliqi (1934-1998) was an impressionist and expressionist painter of Kosovo. Born into a family of artists in Pristina, Mulliqi attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade under Zoran Petrović. ,

<sup>23</sup> Xhevdet Xhafa (1934-) currently a correspondent member of the Kosovo Arts and Science Academy, a prominent Kosovo painter.



there, plus you don't know what format will you develop the photographs that are taken with a digital camera, for example you capture small details which you cannot maximize then... but with a film you can scan the very details and develop a photograph as big as that wall with every detail. Because for example, in the Blood Feuds Reconciliations I took photographs of the gatherings and imagine, I developed it in a 3X2 meters format and put it in the National Arts Gallery. Were you there? Yes? Were you there? {She asks the interviewer and the cameraman}

**Noar Sahiti:** No...

**Lala Meredith-Vula:** Haha, mistake, that's where you could see people far in the hills, for example one couple... the gathering, here the face of a person as big as this {shows with hands} with a negative film... and if I took it with a digital camera, with pixels, I would not be able to see the face if I make it this big... that is old, it is better, I mean as for today, I am looking at my archive, I am scanning it, but it needs time. I want to make exhibitions and everything else, because I have it like, how to say, a treasure, it's like a treasure... a treasure, my biggest treasure.