

INTERVIEW WITH DRITA VUKSHINAJ

Prizren | Date: July 27, 2012

Duration: 78 minutes

Present:

1. Drita Vukshinaj (Speaker)
2. Mimoza Paçuku (Interviewer)
3. Kaltrina Krasniqi (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.

Childhood

Mimoza Paçuku: Can you please tell me how you experienced your childhood?

Drita Vukshinaj: Yes. My name is Drita Luri Vukshinaj. I was born in Prizren on October 3, 1954. Prizren is a historical city, my childhood was in Prizren, say, I was my mother's second child. We were two brothers and I. I was an active child and one day, when I was six, I fell from a tree and got a foot injury, from which I still suffer.

It was a big injury then, because there was no adequate medical treatment for it in Kosovo. A doctor came from Skopje once a month. My mother was working at that time, my mother took me to the doctor, and Kosovo doctors first said that they had to amputate my leg because the bone was badly injured, but a doctor from Skopje said that I should go to Skopje, and stay there. My mother sent me there for a checkup, but the mentality of many people, including my father, was that he wouldn't allow my mother to stay with me at the hospital, so he made me return to Prizren.

I started to go to school. My mother took good care of me, but I was a child who did not stay away from friends, and perhaps because of that my friends also accepted me, because I didn't stay away, I was always among them. My mother died, I was ten and a half years old when our grandmother took care of us, my mother's mother, because my father was from the Tetovo area¹ and he had no relatives here, so we lived under the care of our grandmother. These are some moments of my childhood that I'll never forget, my foot injury became worse every day.

In Prizren, a woman whose daughter had a disability as well, and who had recovered in Belgrade, stopped me in the street. She stopped me and said: "Why don't you go to Belgrade for treatment?" And I said, "I don't know how. My mother has died, and I just don't know how." She showed me how to collect all the papers needed. (Sighs) I was in seventh grade then. During the summer holidays, after I finished seventh grade, I managed to gather all the documents and papers, without saying anything to my father or any of my family members. I was very close to my brothers, they always took me to the city² with their friends, they would never leave me alone, even though I had a disability. Once I gathered all the paperwork, I said to my father, "Let's go together to the hospital in Bajnicë."³ He said, (raises her voice) "But you already were in Skopje's hospital." "No I said I want to go there." He heeded me and so we went.

¹The Tetovo's area is in northwestern Macedonia, and is primarily inhabited by Albanians.

²City, in this context, can be understood as the center of Prizren, which is a broader geographic region.

³Bajnice was the name of the hospital in Belgrade.

I could speak a little Serbian because my uncle lived in Croatia, and every year we went to visit him. His wife was Bosnian, so that is why I could speak Serbian. We went to Belgrade, it was during the summer, and the medical examinations and checkups were done on the fifth floor of the building, where the windows were open and there was an open space directly by the windows and the doctor said to my father, “We need this, that she stays in the hospital for a while and has an operation” and my father said, (changes her tone) “No, I don’t want my daughter to have an operation, and I don’t want anything to happen to her just because of leg surgery.” At that moment (smiles), I jumped into the empty space near the windows, the windows were open, and I said to my father in Albanian, “Sign the document, or I will jump out the window!” And I said to the doctor in Serbian, “If my father doesn’t sign this document, the time will come either to cut off my leg or to save it with one or two surgeries.” The doctor was shocked, he begged my father, I repeated to dad, “Make a move, and I will jump out the window and fall down!” (Smiles) Then my father had no choice but to sign, and I stayed in the hospital.

I finished eighth grade in the Serbian language, I had no problem because I could speak the language. I had four surgeries there without going home because I was afraid that my father wouldn’t sign the papers for further surgeries. I had to undertake another one, but I went home for a little break, I had a cast and I wasn’t afraid any longer that my father would not sign the papers. I had to have some screws taken out of my leg. When I came back to Prizren after a year and a half, almost two years, I found Prizren to be, I don’t know, I felt as if I was born again. When I went to the *lagje*⁴ where I was born, Koridhë, I looked for the friends with whom I grew up. I stayed in Prizren for two months, and then went back to the hospital, where I stayed for a short time, and then went back home for good...

When I came back, I removed my cast, but some consequences of the injury remained, however, they were small compared to the ones I had and I overcame those with the help of my brothers and friends. I was always with friends, I was always with friends in the city, my big brother was the one who gave me the courage. In Prizren there was only one discoteque this was before the 70’s and my brother took me every night to the club, where he always told me, “You need to be with us, don’t worry about your leg, it won’t bother you in anything that you do. You can do any work, any movement.” I was a very active child also at home, because I did all the work by myself regardless whether it was a man’s or a woman’s job. If the electricity didn’t work, or some light bulb broke, I tried to fix it, I chopped wood, I did all of these things at home. My grandmother was very old and very sad because two of her daughters had died very young, my mother and my aunt. My brother tried to help her take care of us and did the best he could to support us both financially and emotionally, but it was I who was my brothers’ sister, mother, who took care of everything and all the house work. My grandmother didn’t eat bread from the store, so we had to bake it at home.

I finished eighth grade in the hospital in Belgrade, and when I returned to Prizren, I had to take three more tests, and then they gave me the eighth grade diploma. Then my father and my brothers implored me everybody in my generation went to high school in Prizren dad implored me in Prizren there was no typist he said to me, “It would be good for you to study typing

⁴*Lagje* in this context means just neighborhood, but more specifically, in the traditional tribal organization of northern rural Albanians, it refers to a group of families sharing a common ancestor. From now on, it will be translated as neighborhood.

because there is a demand for typists in Prizren and you can get a desk job.” But I wanted to go to a technical school, and study mechanics. I heeded my father, and he registered me in Pristina, I began school there, I had an apartment there, but I still thought about technical school.

Every Saturday I met in the street a classmate who was enrolled in the technical school and had just begun taking classes so I asked him what the lessons were like and I looked at his books.⁵ After a month, I took my documents from Pristina (smiles) and applied to the technical school⁵ and the director of the school told me, “Will you be able to catch up, because you are one month late?” I confidently said, “I will catch up on everything without any problem.” So I registered, and began to go to school there. Dad did not know about it, and one day he asked me, “Aren’t you going to school in Pristina?” I said, “No, because I am going to physical therapy as the doctor told me to do, and Pristina is too far away. I cannot travel. Here it is near, and I am on sick leave.” It took a while but after a month I told him, “Just go get my clothes, the clothes that have remained in the apartment, and bring them here, because I registered in the technical school of Prizren, which I have always dreamed of.” (Smiles) My father was speechless, but he went and took my clothes. I passed that first year and had all Bs because I loved that subject, and I was the only girl in class (smiles) because very few girls studied the subject I had chosen.

About my childhood, I must emphasize something else besides my stay at the hospital, it was 1965, the time when we experienced a great misfortune in our family, our mother died. My mother didn’t die of any illness, she was working, we were three children, and at the time she heard from some women in Prizren that to have an abortion she had to drink an infusion from a flower, *zekum çiçek*. It was May 1st. She sent us my brothers, my father, my grandmother, and me to our aunt’s house. She said, “You go visit your aunt because I have to clean the house, and I will join you later.” We stayed there, waited, but she never came. When we went back, these were moments that I’ll never forget... we found her lying in the bedroom (cries), and even today I see that flower near the window, whose water she had drunk... and my father quickly went with an ambulance to the hospital. But that drug was so poisonous that it had destroyed all her internal organs. The doctors couldn’t get any response from her, because she couldn’t talk anymore, her tongue had thickened. I remember as it were today the doctors talking to her and not capable of hearing her words as to what she had done. A blood drive began in Prizren, the military, the workers of the factory where she was employed, and the schools donated blood, but it didn’t have any effect, because she died in the evening of May 12th. She was buried on May 13th, at the age of thirty. We remained in the mercy and care of our grandmother. I can never forget those years, because she was so young when she died. Whenever I heard children in the neighborhood crying “mother, mother,” I always felt this deep feeling of sadness inside me, because I didn’t have a mother anymore, I had no one to call mother. But we had our grandmother whom we leaned on and who supported us.

My father was also very close to us, he was so close to us that he did not get married because he always said “No,” our maternal grandmother lived two houses past ours, dad bought a house near grandmother and we shared the yard and practically lived in the same house. He said, “I cannot marry while your grandmother is alive, I don’t want to cause more pain, marriage would be an embarrassment, and she will be upset.” So my father didn’t marry again, he stayed with us, and he reared us. We had an average standard of living because we were given mother’s pension, dad

⁵The technical school was located in Prizren.

was also receiving a disability pension because while he served in the army a horse hit him, and he had two or three broken bones, his military pension was good. My father was strong, and he worked during the summer, so we had an average standard of life. He wanted us to get an education, so my brothers and I, the three of us, went to technical high school (smiles). My little brother and I both studied as mechanics, but my older brother studied architecture. So...we were a small family, we didn't have many relatives, our only relatives were our friends and neighbors.

There are also some other moments that I spent in the hospital. Since I was there for a long time, I started eighth grade there because luckily I spoke the language. There were all grade levels, and teachers were present. There was a department where all classes were taught, it was a hospital where some patients had to stay for years, especially the patients who would do certain complicated operations to the spinal cord, they had to stay there for three or four years. The hospital offered the patients the opportunity to learn so that they wouldn't be illiterate. At first I had a little trouble understanding certain terms used in Serbian, but I quickly learned and adapted so I didn't have any problem. Others had problems, there were some young girls from Gjilan and Vushtrri who didn't speak Serbian and were mistreated by the nurses. And destiny...our rooms were separated by glass windows, and I saw the nurses mistreat Albanian girls, but they separated us and did not allow us to stay in one room. At one point I ran and confronted the nurse or the doctor, or whoever was there, I confronted them. "Why?" (changes her tone) "Because she soiled the bed sheets, or whatever." I told them, "Well it happens. Sick people will soil their sheets," I supported them in these cases, and I was able to defend the others. When they graded us, they discriminated against us a lot compared to the others because there were people from all over, Serbia, Yugoslavia. They always looked at us suspiciously, the instructors too, because we now spoke their language and that worried them. (Smiles) I finished my eighth grade there.

There was an interesting moment in the hospital when I had my surgery, they didn't put me in a cast, but they lifted my leg with a metal bar which had a 90 degree angle {moves her hands in a 90 degree angle}, I stayed for two days in the emergency room, and when they brought me here, I had this surgical drain on my leg. The drain did not hurt, but I was a child who was accustomed to not stay in one place for two days (smiles), I stayed in the emergency room for two days and said, "My leg hurts right there," and the doctor said, "You don't have any pain there." And I said, "It hurts! And you have to remove it." He said, "But it is there to keep your wound clean." I cried, "It hurts here, it doesn't hurt anywhere else," then they did not have a choice, they removed the drain because I could not look at it.

There was a girl from Gjilan, [Lule]. Her room was very far and I wanted to see her (smiles), but I couldn't from my room. I could not communicate with her until I learned how to understand sign language with letters written like this {demonstrates letters in sign language} so we talked that way, we talked with a window between us. Then the doctor came, removed the drain (smiles), and left. Nearby there was a girl who used a wheelchair, but it was little, so I looked around. I looked at that wheelchair, and what else to do? I sat on the wheelchair, but didn't know how to hold my leg. The leg was 90 degrees above the other leg {shows with her hands} and so I went with the wheelchair along the hallway to her. When the doctor came out into the hallway, he said (raises her voice), "Luli," he grabbed his head "What did you do? You just had a difficult surgery!" I just listened to him talk and went to the girl from Gjilan. When she saw me {shrugs} she was very happy and said, "Thank God you had your surgery and managed to get up so quickly." I said, "I got up but I

gave myself permission because the doctor would not let me, and I wanted to see you so I came here.” (Smiles) And I have not forgotten that moment and how much I risked. The surgery was very difficult, but I took the risk and went to see her.

I have to say that the hospital was very good. It didn't help only me, but all of Kosovo. They performed surgeries for which we did not need to pay, the doctors were extraordinary specialists and very good. I hope God's will is that now and in the future we'll have such doctors in Kosovo so that our children don't have to go abroad to have very expensive surgeries.

Another childhood moment that I will never forget is before I went to the hospital, it was '68, when the Albanian flag was raised at Shadervan⁶ in Prizren, my brother Simon was the one who raised the flag in Prizren, and the police intervened. There were many people at Shadervan, and they [the police] wanted to take the flag away. My brother was so smart and so fast, he took the flag and ran as fast as he could. They ran after him, but they couldn't catch him, I knew that his favorite place for walking was across Marash⁷ so from the morning on I wandered around there, walked, when my brother who was hiding behind a big stone in Marash, whistled. I turned back and approached him, and he said, “I am in the cave of the castle⁸ near the 42 stairs, I am staying there, do not tell anybody about this, I have the flag, you must bring me some bread.” I didn't tell my father, dad was looking for him everywhere, the police found out who took the flag and came often to our home, searching, but I didn't talk. I prepared food for him every day and send it to him, at the same time every day, to the cave near the castle. He remained hidden in the castle for over one month just because he didn't want to give them the flag. (Smiles) After a month, he came out and gave the flag to the people who had raised it in Shadervan, because they had been arrested that day by the police, but were released after two weeks, but the flag never reached the hands of the Serbian police.

I have to say something about the castle as well. It was near our neighborhood, where I was born. All the children...the children went to the castle every day, and even though I was sort of disabled, I always went with them, and ran as they did. We didn't go on the regular road, but on the road from Marash, a very narrow and small alley, but I climbed up that road as well. I would look at them and say, “I can do it, too,” (smiles) and I walked till the top. Sometimes we saw snakes on top of the castle and we took them in our hands by their head and we were afraid of letting them go, “What do we do now!?” Below in Marash there was a house with chickens, and what did we do? We went near a chicken with the snake and the snake bit the chicken and the chicken died and we ran away from there. (Smiles) We took the snakes to our neighborhood and threw them in the direction of children, and they got very scared, and we laughed because they thought that those snakes were poisonous, but they weren't at all. Those are some childhood memories that I will never forget.

⁶The fresh water drinking fountain in the main square of Prizren. Shadervan (Sadirvan in Arabic) means precisely fountain, built to provide water for more than one person at once, usually for ritual ablutions, and is a typical element of Ottoman architecture.

⁷Marash is a park upriver from the center, at the foot of a hill above the city. The small area consists of several traditional residential buildings, the 1833 Mosque of Maksut Pasha, a mausoleum of the Saadi order, and the eighteenth century mill [now café Mullini]. Near the river, a sizeable 400yearold plane tree, the only one of its kind in the Balkans, is located beside a natural spring.

⁸The castle consists of the ruins of a medieval fortress built by the Byzantines, expanded by the Serbian Njemanjić dynasty and finally by the Ottomans.

Last night I met a friend of mine, whom I hadn't seen since the 1990s, because she lives in Sweden, we spent three or four hours talking and reminiscing about the past and the days we spent growing up together. I don't forget those moments, but there are also moments with my elementary school classmates. I was an exemplary student and a very friendly child with everybody, boys and girls, and so I was...close to all of them. I was also very close to my teacher Isane Alo, who was very dear to me. I was in fourth grade when my mother died and my teacher's mother had died one year before that, so she always wore black clothes and a black headscarf. Three or four days after my mother died I went to school wearing a black headscarf and my teacher stopped me and said, "You don't have to put a headscarf on." And I asked, "Why? You have been wearing one for such a long time after your mother died, and you keep wearing it and I will wear it because my mother died and I will not take it off." For a long time she tried to convince me to take the black headscarf off because I was a child, and one day I accepted her wish and went to school without the headscarf and she hugged me and kissed me (smiles) and said that it was very good that I decided to remove it, because she said, "You have done well, because you are a child and your mother would be sad if she could see you with the headscarf," so I removed the headscarf, thanks to my teacher.

The school wasn't too far from us. However, I was always worried because I was a child with a disability, I was lively, but the condition of my leg only got worse, this sick leg that worried me but fortunately they didn't amputate it...When we ran as kids, sometimes I couldn't run as fast as the others could, and I would be upset and I would scream at them and ask them not to run so fast because I couldn't catch up with them, but it was a very understanding group and they ran at the speed that I could (smiles), they did not outrun me. Also during gym classes, when we were in the gym and we had exercises to do, I did all of them maybe because I had great will, I don't know, I did not want to be separated from the others, only running bothered me a little. I've achieved everything I wanted to with the help and support of my family, especially my big brother, because my little brother would sometimes tell me, "Don't go to town, stay home, you go out every night," but my big brother did not leave me behind (smiles) and took me with him every time. We grew up, say... {coughs} without a mother, but we were very polite and well mannered, and all the people in the neighborhood envied us. We were among the best students, the people in our street, it was a cul de sac, praised us and told us that we were the best students in school, perhaps because we had a student from every house who was either in a class with me, or with one of my brothers, so everyone knew that the three of us were excellent students.

I began to cook when my mother died and my old grandmother was old, so I cooked and prepared... "But how do I cook?" I wandered around the neighborhood, I knew when they were preparing the meal, I stood by them and watched. What they prepared today, I did it tomorrow. In almost every neighborhood there were maybe thirtytwo or thirtythree families that I visited to see what they had prepared and how they had prepared it, how they made that food, and ran home to make it. I never said that there was something I did not know how to cook, (smiles) that I couldn't do handiwork, because I was always interested to watch what others did and then do it myself. There was no jealousy, no, I am not a jealous person, I didn't have that feeling, why somebody did it and I did not, when someone did something, why I was not able to it too. (Smiles) Although a child, I was that way, and I always cooked and did handiwork. Women back then did a lot of handiwork, and I too began to do that as a young girl, to knit sweaters...everything, and what the women in the neighborhood did, we did too.

I will not forget that when winter arrived we poured water on the street for it to freeze and the next day we went out with our sleds. Before I poured the water the women in the neighborhood begged us, “When you want to pour water call us, and leave us the sleds outside so we can ride on them, (laughs) because during the day everybody passes by and can see us.” We called them and it was nice to see older women, mothers with kids, get on the sleds and slide down nearly 50 meters or more. It was happiness for us too, because the winters back then were very harsh. The snow froze the street, and it was pure happiness to sled in that small cobblestone street we had there, the snow covered the street and we went sledding. I can mention friends with school with whom I am still in touch today: Bukuria, Neharja, Sadeti, Selvetja, today we meet and I talk with many of them about the school days of the past, but there were also some of them who didn’t go to high school nor have any higher education and I meet with them too and talk with them. I have been very close to my friends. (Smiles)

Youth

Mimoza Paçuku: How do you remember your youth?

Drita Vukshinaj: My youth was very productive, I graduated from the high school Gani Qavdarbasha in 1974 all the students from my generation went to Sarajevo to study, but my father and my brothers begged me, “Go to Pristina because...grandmother is old, you must come home once a week to take care of her.” But I didn’t want to go to Pristina. I enrolled in the Commerce School [now Business Management School] in Peja.

I spent my youth in Prizren, but on summer holidays we went to the seaside and spent three months by the Adriatic sea with my big brother,⁹ (smiles) we went to places like Ulcinj, Hercegnovi, Nigalo, Bar, Dubrovnik, and Rrjeka. We also went to Osjek,¹⁰ where our uncle lived, and we stayed at his place. Those were very happy days of my youth, which I spent in an environment that was very lively and then returned to Prizren where the mentality was less sophisticated. I told all my friends that we should act, we must do this, leave what we had inherited from our parents. There was this place, Nashec,¹¹ where we usually went to swim and sunbathe, but many girls didn’t come because their families didn’t let them. Probably I was the only one, with the exception of two or three girls, who sometimes went. As I said before, I have to thank my big brother for the support he gave me.

I enrolled in the Commerce School in Peja, but at the end of 1975 I found a job in a factory of synthetic yarns in Prizren, I was the floor manager of the department for the maintenance of the machines, they let me start to work there and continue my studies by correspondence with the Commerce School in Peja. I always worked during the first shift, because the department worked in three shifts, later I asked to change shifts because I had to take care of my family. I had a lot of time off, because we didn’t have to work one week, but two days shifts: two days, three days, and then three days off. This was convenient for me, I had no problems with sleep, I rested a little, I did not have a difficult job. There the machines worked at night, or one shift, two...the job was

⁹These are cities on the Adriatic coast of Montenegro and Croatia.

¹⁰The fourth largest city of Croatia, in the northeastern region of Slavonia.

¹¹A small locality near Prizren, by the river Drini i Bardhë.

good, and the company also. Except our boss was a Serb and we had some problems with him. The moment we wanted to do something, because we were mostly Albanians there, though there were Serbs as well and we all had that boss who opposed every decision we wanted to make. We were removed from our jobs in the '90s, and we were left jobless.

From the year 1975...in 1977 I married. My husband does not have a disability. He never had one...we met. But I wanted to remain only friends with him, did not want to marry, but he insisted that we get married, I didn't want to marry him. I always thought that I was a woman with a disability, and I did not want... I thought he could find a woman like him, but no, our destiny was to get married, in 1977 we got married. He had gotten out of jail that year; he had been sentenced to four years of detention, that year he was released from jail. He came from a village near Prizren, but he didn't have family, except for a sister, and she was married. I tried to persuade him to move to his house in the village, but he didn't want to, because four years had passed without anyone living in that house, and it had fallen into disrepair. So we moved to an apartment in Prizren, bought some furniture, and started our lives.

Also my husband's family, he too had an unusual childhood...when his parents, both mother and father, had been political prisoners, when his father spent 13 years in Goli Otok.¹² He himself was in prison for four years, when he was released we got married.

He also had a sentence that I did not know...it was one year and two months that they had sentenced him, he was in prison but they released him. Celebrations for the anniversary of the League of Prizren¹³ were held in 1978, and he and some friends went to take a photo in front of the building of the League of Prizren, and the police arrested him, jailed him and I was left alone. I went to the police immediately, I was a very strong woman, I didn't want to leave my work to others, I always wanted to do what I had to do by myself. I went to the police station and said, "Why have you jailed him..?" I said, "He has been already in detention and he has had one year and two months, and if he did anything wrong he would have to be arrested in order to protect freedom." "Then they said "We caught him in the act, and we incarcerated him."

"He has to stay in the jail of [Srems] Mitrovica," they said "Tonight he will leave Prizren in the evening by bus and then go to Belgrade. "I went to the bus station and gave him some cigarettes and some useful things, but the next morning I traveled to Sremska Mitrovica [the northwestern district of Serbia]. I went to Belgrade, to Srems, by train because the return ticket was free. When I got to Sremska Mitrovica, they said, "No, we did not bring him here, but to Mitrovica in Kosovo." It was a lie, just to abuse me. I returned to Prizren, and then I traveled to Mitrovica the next day, where they told me he was in Srems, in Mitrovica of Belgrade. Then I looked for his lawyer, I had to find out who he was since I didn't know. I found out that he was in New Belgrade and I went there and found him, today there are cell phones and it is easier to find anything.

¹² Island in the north of the Adriatic sea, from 1949 through 1956 a maximum security penal colony for Yugoslav political prisoners, where individuals accused of sympathizing with the Soviet Union, or other dissenters, among them many Albanians, were detained. It is known as a veritable gulag.

¹³This was the 1878 Albanian Alliance that fought against border changes decided at the Congress of Berlin by the Great Powers. The League demanded autonomy from the Ottoman Empire. The building where the Albanian leaders made their *besa* (sworn alliance) is on the river, upstream from the center of town. It is now a museum. The current building is a reconstruction of the original one, which Serbian troops burned down in 1999.

It was a hassle back then to find the lawyer only through landline phones and postal addresses, he said "He is in Sremska Mitrovica," he is this and that, "there is a sentence and he has not followed the rules...14 months, one year, he is doing 16 months." "Yes," I said "I have been there but they turned me back." He said, "Did they turn you back?" I said, "Yes, you must come with me to Sremska Mitrovica and see whether he is there or where is he?" "It's not he said I don't believe you." After they turned me back, he came with me to Sremska Mitrovica, there, and I saw it was my husband there, we talked, and then I returned home. It has been a short time and we weren't officially married yet, and we could not do anything, we could not request a reduction of the sentence. In the Municipal Assembly, we were asking every lawyer and everyone, that I lived with him there are witnesses who testify, and so two witnesses testified that we lived together; so we sent a request, and they removed six months and 10 months remained and then he was released and came to Prizren. The police still followed him because of political issues, they influenced wherever he applied for a job and he could never get a job. I was working at that time, and I told him, "We don't stop working, we must work until you find a job." Then he started to work on his own, fixing pools, telephones cables, etc. and then he began to hire people...that way we started a family. We have three daughters and I get great support from my husband, then and now he never considered me to be a person with a disability. I have always been able to perform every task by myself, I always did everything by myself.

I had a good youth, it was normal that all of us had to face problems because we were a family always targeted by the Serbian occupiers my brothers, my husband, me, all of us. So my brothers too were involved from 1977, when the illegal movement started, we all joined, my husband too was a member, when he came out of prison the Serb occupier always kept us under surveillance, what we did and where we went. My brothers started to go to college, my big brother transferred to Gjakova and got married, and he started to work there, in the Dukagjini factory as an architect. But the police forced him to leave Kosovo in 1984.

There were...moments, when my first daughter was born in 1980, and my brother got married before me, that I felt a great emptiness inside, because he did not have children. I had my daughter, but had also a husband and a job, I did not want to use the cradle but when I saw my brother one morning, it was Wednesday, market day in Prizren, he had bought a cradle and brought it to me. (Smiles) I told him, "No, I am the cradle myself," and he said, "You were raised in a cradle, both of us were raised in a cradle, and my niece will be raised in a cradle, too." I did not want to deny him his wish so we put the girl in the cradle, but I always felt emptiness though and I could not hold my daughter with the happiness I wanted in front of my brother, because he did not have children. They loved her very much.

My daughter was born in 1980...when my father died in 1981 my grandmother was left on her own with my younger brother, but he was studying, and my older brother was in Gjakova. Then I had to leave my rented house and move to my father's house and take care of my grandmother. I am grateful to my husband for agreeing to move back to my father's house and care for my grandmother, I must thank my husband who agreed to move to that house and take care of grandma. She was very old, she died at 102, but she was always sad and talked to herself, "Why didn't I die, why did my daughters die?" but that was God's will. In 1984, my grandmother died as well, and I used to say all the time when my father died that he died waiting for grandmother to die so he could marry afterwards, but the exact opposite happened, my grandmother died four years after him and so he never married since he did not want to do that to my grandmother. (Smiles)

After my grandmother died, the police went looking for my brothers, both the older and the younger, because the protests of '80'81 happened, with the banners and the signs and all and my brothers were great activists. So, seven days after my grandmother died, my little brother went to Pristina then came back and said, "I love Kosovo, but I definitely have to either leave or fall into the hands of the occupier. I was taken in for questioning but nothing else happened to me." My grandmother died on June 1, 1984. My little brother left Kosovo on June 14, and I haven't seen him since, and my big brother followed two months later. Later, I heard that my younger brother had settled in Sweden, but soon after that he moved to France, to Paris, to work as a translator since he spoke many languages; we talked on the land phone, but rarely. Only I remained in Prizren, I had those two brothers and they went away, and I remained here with my husband and daughter. After the birth of my daughter, I went back to work from maternity leave, I had no one to take care of my girl, so I left her in one of the two kindergartens in Prizren, I would come back from work and we lived like this.

My older brother...he always ran away from the police, but also my younger brother and they told me, "We will catch them with the Interpol." I would tell them, "If only I had such luck to see them again, but I don't know where they are," though I knew where they were, but I just said, "I too would like to see them again if they brought them back to Prizren, would like to have them near because I am alone." They never brought them back, my little brother died in 2010 and I did not see him...but they brought him to Prizren to bury him here, my older brother is still abroad, he comes to visit during the holidays and then leaves again...

Activism

[Part of the interview cut out from the video: the interviewer asks the speaker to talk about the period of activism.]

Drita Vukshinaj: I started working with women when I saw in the daily newspaper *Rilindja*, I think it was 1994, that a Handikos office for people with disabilities had been opened in Prizren... I found out from the paper where the office was and went there on my own. Once there, I met a woman who worked there I knew, they were not disabled, and I told them, "I saw in the paper that this association is for people with disabilities that's why I came." "Yes she said the organization exists since 1983, but in Pristina," but I said, "Are people from Prizren also included?" I knew a woman working there and said to her, "Why didn't you tell me earlier that there was such an organization?" At that time there were 200 disabled persons registered as members, very few of them were women, they were mostly men. Until after the war, after 1999, we had some activities, such as helping poor women, especially women in villages. We identified where this category of people lived.

In 1999, the office reopened and resumed its work, and so more humanitarian aid began to arrive after the war. At that time it was a great surprise that...all these disabled people suddenly appeared, I was one of those who went out day and night, I was out everyday. I went out of town, everywhere, but I had never seen those people before, however, because of the humanitarian aid, people began to declare themselves disabled. We had personal contact with them, but I preferred to be with the women. I talked to them, maybe they were of different ages, 40, 40, 50 years old, and they were from the city, but I had not known or seen them before, and they said

that their families did not let them go out of the house and into society. This motivated me to do even more for this group of people. We started registering them throughout the entire Municipality of Prizren, which had a total of 78 villages. Sometimes it happened that we would go to a house and a woman with disabilities lived right next to that house, but the family living next to her did not know it, so we would not find out unless the other family accepted us into their home, this was one of the greater difficulties that we had. It happened sometimes that we visited a place several times until we convinced the families that these women need to be out in society, needed to be integrated, needed to gain some skills.

Many donors who came to Handikos perhaps saw with what will I wanted to help these women. They asked me, "Why?" but I told them "To tell you the truth, I want these women to be part of society the way I have been, it upsets me that they have been isolated, I want to attract them because there are plenty of ways, plenty of ideas, in which they can participate in society." I started with many projects, one was to combat illiteracy since many of them did not know how to read or write and the majority of them took tailoring and handicrafts courses. We gave them material that the families had an interest in, so the families had an incentive, if girls brought materials back home, they would let her come back to us more easily...It happened that with most projects, and all those projects until today, for 1213 years now, I was paid a salary for only two and a half years. All the projects I accomplished were on a voluntary basis, and I did it for the sole reason of having more resources for further activities. I actually remember Vjollca Cavolli from the CDF [Community Development Fund], saying to me once, "What about you, Drita, how about at least a small salary of 100 Marks [at that time we had Marks]?" I said to her, "No, because I lack the working materials that I want to get to make those women work, to give them something to do. I did not want a salary for myself, but only money so I can buy material for further activities. More..." I said "I need to buy gas, since they cannot walk, I do not want a salary, but gas money, so we can drive them to the center of town and they can relax."

There were these meetings every week, sometimes more often than that, because the women wanted to get together, they couldn't wait for the days when they would meet up again. These activities with the office were not the only ones in which I participated. Whenever I heard about a women's organization, I got involved. In the Municipal Assembly, in every directorate, in every legal act that there was, I was interested in reading them, even though it was not my profession, it was the profession of someone who had studied something else, but I was interested in every law, in every regulation passed by the Municipal Assembly that was based on their demands. Before the war, there was regulation 2004/45, and now after the war 2007/40 was adopted.¹⁴ I was present in every meeting organized by civil society or the institutions in Prizren, Pristina, wherever, in order to understand what the institutions and women's associations were offering so I could take something out of it and implement it with this group of people, I did this without hesitation or compensation.

I was active in all these meetings, so when I heard about the [Kosova] Women's Network in 2001 or 2002, I immediately became involved and I went to every meeting of the Women's Network regardless of whether travel expenses were paid, also because in most cases travel expenses were covered, but I have been active and I voiced my opinion. I pointed out that there are disabled

¹⁴The interviewee remembers incorrectly. Before the war, persons with disabilities could make requests for assistance, but regulations only came into place after the war as legal procedures decided by UNMIK. Requests are currently made on the basis of the Law on Local Self Government (2008/03L040).

women who are discriminated against by men twice. That these women suffered from domestic abuse, if not physical, then psychological abuse. When they needed treatment, it happened that I became so close to the women that when they had a problem at home they would call me, even after working hours, on Saturdays and Sundays, to talk and solve the problem or find a way for me to help them. And I always was the one who helped this group, whose condition today is not as bad as before the war, but there is still discrimination. Their level of employment is not as it should be, although employment is a problem for the entire population.

I remember in the year 2000, I organized a field trip all around Kosovo. We went to Prekaz¹⁵ as well, there was a woman in the group who was older, at the time she was 50 years old, and when we got to Prizren...we visited Pristina, Prekaz, Peja, we had lunch in Istog. In Peja, we stopped in Deçan, and we went to Gjakova, so there were many Kosovar cities that we visited, and when we returned to Prizren, she told me, "Even if I died right now, I would not want anything else because all my life, I have never seen any other place beyond my neighborhood. I am 50 years old and I did not even manage to see Prizren that much." She said, "Thank you so much for allowing me to get out and see Pristina, Peja, Deçan," she mentioned all the cities we had been to and I felt deeply moved by her words. She gave me even more courage and every year, not once, but twice I would take the women on excursions around Kosovo, and they would choose where to go. I had seen all the cities, and so when they wanted to see Gjilan, or Peja, or Rugova...I would take them on a tour so they could be happy, socialize. Regardless of how heavy their disabilities were, they had talents that they wanted to express (smiles).

I started a driving school project to enable women with disabilities to get driver's licenses, it was for twenty women but I did not take them all from Prizren, I took them from the region. There were some young women from Rahovec, the village of Xerx, the village of Zhurr of Suhareka, the surrounding of Suhareka, and villages in the district of Prizren, I was left more at the end, I did not want to. Although I needed it...even as a young girl, I did not want to travel alone. Although many years earlier my brother begged me, but we tell ourselves we do not have a complex...but no, (smiles) this complex exists today. Today...it also exists and my husband sometimes begged me, "Get a driver's license," I said "No, that they will say, she finished school, got a job, had a family, and now she even wants to drive a car." I was influenced by what they would say about me and I didn't get my driver's license. I let others get their driver's license and now there are many women who drive a car, there are even women in a wheelchair who drive a car. They strived more and more to leave their houses (smiles). The reason...the car, there was this right for those who had a pension, because many of them were on a pension, did not have to pay customs to get a car. In many cases the women had family abroad who could perhaps help them in different ways, but they could bring a car without having to pay customs, nothing, and they registered the cars and today can drive them. (Smiles) The women who got their driver's license weren't the only ones to benefit, also their families did because the women stopped being a burden.

I am not engaged in projects concerning women with disabilities only, but also in other women's organizations working in Prizren. I worked earlier, but also today...with Marta, Nexhmija, Dilja,

¹⁵Prekaz is the site of the Adem Jashari Memorial Complex, a state park in honor of the Jashari family, which was massacred there by Serbian troops in March 1998. The Jashari are celebrated as the first nucleus of the Kosovo Liberation Army and especially Adem, as their military leader, is considered the most powerful symbol of national resistance.

Vjosa, and we have collaborated in all our activities. But I am also an activist in other causes such as the Association of Blind and Deaf People, also with them I found a warmth when they called me to help in any kind of request, or to assist in different ways.

I am always available and ready to help. Also, I have a good collaboration with the [Municipal] Officer for Gender Equality, when she has problems at work, she always calls me and asks me, “Drita, what is this? When is this?” When someone wants to register as an NGO...when and what document, I have always been near when they prepare the founding statute, I make them register. Whenever I hear, today, and then I hear that an organization of women has been opened, I go there and talk to them. I tell them, “Come on, join the Women’s Network, you find yourselves with nothing, nothing, you cannot...they will give you a list of donors.” Look, on Monday I will go to Mamush¹⁶ where a month ago an association of Turkish and Albanian women was registered, and I will bring them the application to join the Women’s Network.

Also, I go to the Municipal Assembly and monitor events on a voluntary basis, I don’t get paid. I have been active in Prizren since 2000, when the sessions first started, I go and take notes on what interests me, how many women talk there. We have always campaigned to get women to vote for women, and it is a fair quota, almost equal, almost 48% are women, and we always win the votes, when the electoral campaign starts we go and advocate. We organize and hold meetings in the neighborhoods, in villages, and tell them... “Vote for women.” Of course we don’t tell them which party to vote for, everyone has their own party for which they vote, but also in that party there is a woman who can speak up in the Assembly. But as I see in Suhareka, I have been in Prizren and... during the meetings of the Municipal Assembly even when we voted for women and they voted for women, they didn’t speak up for the problems of women. I always say that maybe even in the civil society we must be closer to those members of the Assembly if we want them to speak up. Maybe there is no problem, but also after they get elected with our votes they don’t come to visit us, after the election they do not come, so this creates a gap between civil society and the representatives whom we have elected. But we have to invite them to our regular meetings, to invite them where women meet. And let them hear it from the women themselves, not only the leaders, but they must hear themselves about the problems the women face today, and raise these issues whether at the local or central level.

I will always be close to women wherever they are. I want them to be more active, but there are still those views among families, that the family itself, the members of family, do not let them [be active]. There are married and single women who aren’t free as they should be.

There are some moments where I have been very touched by people with disabilities. It has given me great happiness to work on projects, but the greatest happiness I felt from 2006 to 2007, when I began to take people with disabilities to the seaside. I found some funding and with a group of disabled individuals, we organized a trip to Durrës,¹⁷ and among the many moments there was one moment that touched me a lot, when this member who was in his 30s and who came there with his wife and two children. He did not bathe, but his children and wife did, and we saw him and one day while talking to him we convinced him to get in the water too. Both of his legs were amputated, “No” he said, “How can I get in?” Then we had a wheelchair and we said that we would send him with a wheelchair to the water and he would get off and drag himself to the water.

¹⁶A small municipality with a Turkish demographic majority.

¹⁷This is a port and beach town on the Adriatic coast of Albania.

(Smiles) We took him and got close to the water, when we got close to the water he said “I cannot get off” and he felt insecure because he had never been in the water, but he got in. He began to get in the water and we stayed close and drew him to where it was deeper and while we held his hands we offered some swimming tires.

He started to swim while holding the tire and holding each other and his children were filled with extraordinarily great happiness and chanted, “Dad, dad, dad.” He had gone to the seaside with his children every year, but he never swam, and he thanked us for our help in going into the sea. After that first time that he swam he told all of us, “What a great happiness is to swim, to bathe in water like this. I never tried this before, thank you so much for persuading me to get in the water.” His words were that “Every year he said I went to the seaside for the sake of the children but I never experienced water as today, thank you so much.” When he went into the water we all applauded, we had given him the courage not to stay all alone at the beach. But to continue further, he continued and said, “What happiness to swim in the waves of the sea. I have only experienced the water of the bathroom when I wash at home, I didn’t even get the chance to swim in the river Bardh of Prizren. This is the first time in my life that I experienced water with such great pleasure” and he said “Thank you.” From that time on, every year he with his children either goes with us or without us but he has started to swim (smiles), when there was an extraordinarily great complex. There are other moments like this, but this was an extraordinary moment that was very emotional then.

Dreams

Mimoza Paçuku: What were some of your biggest dreams in life, and which of them did you achieve?

Drita Vukshinaj: My biggest dream in life was to have...I had the desire of having many children. Destiny was that I didn’t have children for 14 years after my first daughter was born and I became very worried. I always said that my dream of having many children would not be realized. We had each other, we were three children, but my brothers went abroad when they were still young...But thank God, after 14 years, I gave birth to two other girls. (Smiles) I am very happy that I have three daughters, I was sad with only one child. I would say, “Have also a sister,” because I didn’t have a sister. Everybody says that a sister is like a mother, I didn’t have a sister and my mother died when I was so young, I did not have a mother...a support. So I was very happy when my second daughter was born, (smiles) that my daughters could be close to one another and when my third daughter was born, I wasn’t sad at all.¹⁸ They are three girls, so among the dreams that I had, I realized my dream to have more than one child. Another dream of mine was to be among women and to help them time after time, regardless of what problems they may have, that I could help them solve their problems and be around them (smiles).

¹⁸In traditional Albanian culture, having three girls could be considered less than desirable as the culture historically has tended to favor boys.

