

## INTERVIEW WITH OLA SYLA

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Duration: 106 minuta

### Present:

1. Ola Syla (Speaker)
2. Jeta Rexha (Interviewer)
3. Donjeta Berisha (Camera)
4. 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**

*[Part of the interview is cut out from the video: the interviewer asks the speaker to talk about her childhood and family.]*

**Ola Sylja:** I am Ola Sylja, born on 8<sup>th</sup> of September 1955 in Istog. I remember the day of my birth because throughout my life my mother has told me, “You are noisy and spirited because you were born on a market day,” because Thursday was a market day in Istog. I had a very happy childhood, I mean, in the period during very early childhood. I was born in an intellectual family, at the time my father was the chairman of the municipal court in Istog, and my mother was from Peja, but of Montenegrin descent, where she worked in hospital then, immediately after the Second World War. She worked as a nurse and at the same time was getting educated. There she met my father, which means that at that time they married for love and after she got married she quit education and work and came to live in Istog.

So, I was the fourth born child, the first child was my brother, then my two sisters and I was the fourth child. I don’t know why I was so different from my family. They were very quiet people, very calm, and I somehow, I don’t know why, maybe because I was the youngest one, or my personality was like that, but everyone, when we were together in the family, they all had their eyes on me, when I was a child, later when I grew up and perhaps today, too.

What I would like to highlight from my childhood are few occasions that are much related to my life now. I remember when I was five or six years old, it was a tradition that on May 1st they would slaughter a lamb, and so my father bought a lamb one or two months prior, to keep it home and to nourish it, and to later slaughter it for the 1<sup>st</sup> of May. And somehow I got so close to the lamb, I was going to sleep and waking up with it. And I tied two bows on the head {she points the bow with hands}, on its horns, and became really close to it. Naturally, the day to slaughter the lamb arrived, and my father told my mother, “Get Ola and take her somewhere, don’t let her see the lamb being slaughtered, and we’ll think of something to tell her about where and how it has gone.” And my mother, like all mothers, was a hard-working woman, very skillful, precious, but quite rigorous. And seemingly, when she took me away to go and buy something, to trick me, it seems that she simply thought about how they would sort out the meat and what were they doing there... She bought me a few things, and she returned me home.

When I entered the garden, when I saw my lamb hanging on its two legs and being skinned, I don’t know how I didn’t lose my mind that very moment. Especially the way it was hanging with two bows in its head, and I couldn’t scream or anything, I just closed my eyes and went inside. That was something that [happened] when I was most likely five years old, and maybe younger. I don’t even know how I remember this, but I remember it because I have never ever eaten lamb since. To this day, I still don’t eat lamb! But somehow, there are things that make an impression on you, maybe because parents

usually think then... I know it now from my own children. When I was little I usually heard some words, some events that passed by me and they said, "Never mind because she doesn't understand, she is a child." But in fact, precisely those things have left a great impression in my life.

Also I remember the moment when I ate my first orange. So you see, these are all things that are always related to the present. Again, I was around the age of five or six, maybe it is exactly this age when you can remember more. And there was a heavy snow, in those times it was snowing heavily in Istog because I remember the fence all around the house as it was, it was covered in snow, and we the children, when we went out, we would say to our mother, "Uh, someone has stolen the fence." So the snow must have been one, one and a half meter deep.

And I fell ill with measles, and I was so sick with temperature and I couldn't fall asleep at night, most likely it was around midnight when my father came and entered the room. He was a very handsome man, very... maybe to all girls their fathers seem like idols, the most handsome man, but truly he had such an appearance. Maybe it was his radiance too, his inner self that has remained in my memories as an untouchable person. And he entered the room and he was holding something in his hand... now, I am telling you about then, he was holding something in his hand which I thought was an orange ball, because I had never seen an orange before. And he came close and I took it on my hand, I was wearing gloves because the measles {touches her hands} has lots of rash... you get that rash. And in order for me as a child not to be scared of it, my mother put gloves on my hands and I held the orange with my gloves and I didn't know what it was. I had never seen one! He peeled it and I started eating it (smiles). Maybe the freshness, for the first time that taste has left me so much... some breeze, somehow I felt that I really recovered and I fell asleep.

These were some very pleasant experiences of my early childhood, until the time when my father got ill. It was around... he got ill in November, I was nine years old then, I was in third grade. My father was a well-known person with authority in Istog. He was a communist then, after the Second World War... He was a fighter and after the Second World War he worked, the system was like that back then. But, the duty that he had as a communist, as a judge, he helped a lot in [achieving] equal rights for Serbs and Albanians. Most of the times maybe he was even jeopardizing his job and his life to help them, but fortunately the *rreth* we lived in, our fellow locals from Istog, everyone whom he has helped, none has forgotten this. Today, a street in Istog holds my father's name Rexhë Murati, it's the street on which we actually live.

I mean, I can say that he is the only person, from that period, who today, after the war that we have experienced, that [the street] holds the name of a fighter from Second World War. But that was the reason because he used his position, his skills, to help Albanians, because before, when the Second World War ended, it was usually Serbs who had precedence. And in Istog, a wood-processing factory was opened, it was [called] *Sharra*, and my father casually came to visit that workshop, and he realizes that all the employees are Serbs. And my father, then and there, picks up a piece of white paper and he writes on it in Serbian, "*Sharra of Serbs*" and he decides that it should have that name.

This and many other actions he did at at the time continue to be mentioned up to this day. But then... so he passed away when I was around nine, he passed away in 1964. We have called that period "the Ranković Era," it was a very difficult period. No other period is remembered to be worse for Albanians. And plus, he was unsuitable for the system in which he lived and rumor has it, I can't prove it now and we did not prove it as a family, but rumor has it that at that time, somehow it was influenced... meaning the death of my father was arranged with pills, but I can't say that this is true, because we could not prove such thing.

And I was nine then and since father was so well-known and skilled in that community we had many guests coming and going. I and the sister just before me who had a disability, and I was nine, the youngest child, so my mother having many guests and looking after my father, she could not look after us both as well, so she sent us to her friend overnight. So it was she who cared for us, which made work more or less easier for my mother.

I don't remember now how long did I stay there, but I know it was a day, a morning in December. It was a sunny day when she came and she said, "It's time to go home." She was a very good woman and cared for us a lot, but nevertheless I was missing my home a lot and I was looking forward to going back. When I entered the garden, our home was completely covered in wreaths. People were entering and exiting the garden. It was a custom then for everyone to wear all black in the event of a death, especially women were dressed all in black, black headscarf included. It didn't matter if they were Muslim, Catholic, or Orthodox, it was a custom for all. And when I saw them like that, I started suspecting something might have happened.

Then they put my sister and me in a room downstairs and we waited. The stairs went straight up... the house stairs went straight up to the rooms upstairs, to the second floor of our house and towards the bedrooms. And when people were coming downstairs I was praying, "God, Inshallah my mother doesn't come downstairs wearing all black." And at one moment I saw her coming down the stairs. She had elegant black shoes, black nylon pantyhose popular at that time, then the just above the knee length skirt that was standard for all. And {mimics the descent with her hands} she was descending slowly and when I saw her with a black scarf I did not recognize her because all her beautiful natural hair was hidden under the black scarf, I did not recognize her. But when she came close and told me, "Ola, my son!" with a bright smile... then I knew. At that very moment I did not cry, I did not scream, just... She was a very wise woman, she spoke very little, but with the few words that she said, we always sensed her wisdom. So when she spoke to me that way, "Ola, my son," it was as if she were telling me to stay strong as a boy, as a man as we say nowadays, not as a girl.

I can freely tell you that I don't know what character did I have, but I know that since that moment, my life has completely changed. I was like this {turns her palm}, it turned completely. As a nine-year-old child, I understood that life brings many surprises, and it seems to me that at that moment I matured right away. I immediately grew up and I don't remember my childhood at all. What I remember best, as I already told you, is when we we'd sit with people who came to visit because it was a tragic death. My father was 40 and left four children behind. My mother was alone, my father had no brothers, no uncles, no one, and the whole burden of the family fell on my mother.

And I remember when they came and asked my mother, "How are you, are you feeling sad?" she'd say, "Yes, I am quite sad." And when I'd see her crying I thought, "Look at her, she is crying because she lost her husband, but I've lost my father!" There was always this... how should I call it, I was always bothered by the fact that they behaved with children as if they knew nothing, as if they were small and could not feel anything. Whereas, all these events that I have recalled are surely well connected to my present, my future... or they've influenced for good, or bad (smiles). And so my childhood was over just like that!

## Youth

*[Part of the interview cut out from the video: the interviewer asks the speaker to talk about her youth.]*

**Ola Sylja:** We had very good material conditions, meaning that all my wishes were granted while I was a child, but I never got over my father's absence. During my life I may have tried every possible love,

but a very empty space has remained in my life. Losing a parent at an early age is something really hard for a child, and I think it is a loss that cannot be filled, but maybe in the future when she grows up and she can fill the loss the way she knows, or the way she thinks would feel best.

I completed primary school in Istog, as well as the gymnasium. The gymnasium is one of the dearest and best periods of my life because I was both surrounded by family and had friends. I was always loved among friends, because I was always surrounded by many friends. Maybe because some things happened in my life, which were... not bitter... maybe they were bitter, but interestingly I don't know why I have always tried to turn anything that happens in life into positivity. If I lost much, I tried to give somewhere where I could fill up, I mean, giving to someone was filling what was missing in me. So that period was the best.

Istog was a beautiful picturesque place and until the '70s it was very...frequentated, because I couldn't (laughs), I mean... [she addresses the camerawoman] delete this! Istog was a beautiful picturesque town because the spring of [the river] Istog is there, and from the Istog spring several branches... you cannot call them rivers, but you can call them streams, I mean, there was no riverbed, in Istog only somewhere, I mean, above my house. there have been... like a river, a stream because my grandfather had a mill and now that stream has remained. So I actually grew up with the murmur and thunder of running water. My house was a shore on that stream. And because of this there were many mills in Istog.

And I remember in the past, on market days, many people came to grind their flour from all those parts {shows with her hand} that were included in the municipality of Istog. And unfortunately it lasted until '70s because those bridges... those rivers dried up, and then they started building electric mills and it is a pity there isn't one left for a museum at least, because they were very beautiful. I remember when I went there as a child, then we would go to visit from school and it was very interesting because all you could hear was the water, the mill stone {describes the turning of the stone with gestures} and the part which let the wheat or corn in and made the "rak-rak-rak" sound. It was a great pleasure and always the scariest and darkest stories ever told, they were always told about the mills, and therefore sometimes out of curiosity we, the children, would go and visit those places to see how they are or what they look like.

Usually during those times, I am referring to the '70s, I was in high school, interestingly in all municipalities, whether they were smaller or bigger, they were somehow, in fact they had the same development, culturally and... maybe in town they [the people] were a bit better, but actually in smaller towns they had the same opportunities for entertainment. For example, in Istog there was a town *korzo*, where a part of the citizens would hang out, and the other *korzo* was when you went three-four kilometers out of Istog and that road that we would take we used to call it, "the road to Peja." On both sides of the road there was corn, and when you passed that road it was really scary. And when we wanted to smoke hiding from our parents, or we did not want to be seen by someone, we took out cigarettes and entered that road there, met and took walks.

Afterwards, they started organizing dances in Istog, which took place on Saturdays and rarely on Sundays, only when there was a celebration, but usually on Saturdays. And then as a high school graduate, I thought that there would be no problem for me to go to the dance, because I had finished high school. And my eldest brother who took the responsibility, to this date I don't know if my mother approved or not... I don't know if he had the responsibility to look after us three sisters, but he followed us in every step we made and he was very, very strict. And I got together with some friends and they came to wait for me at the front door and I was getting ready and all. Just when I was brushing my hair and looking at myself in the mirror he came to the bathroom door and said, "Don't

you dare think that you're going!" There was no further discussion, he was six years older than me, but even if he was one or two years older, that is how we were raised, he was the eldest brother and you had to listen to him. And I just went out, and I told my friends {shrugs shoulders}. I shrugged, "My brother is not letting me." I could have lied and said, "No, I can't," or, "My foot is hurting," or something, but I was simply always sincere with people with whom I socialized.

They left and I lied down, I started crying, I cried and cried and developed a fever from the stress, and for two days I did not know where I was. I am now calculating maybe it was Saturday, and I only pulled myself together on Monday (laughs). And I noticed when I woke up, I opened my eyes, my brother was standing over me and he said, "Come on, wake up, I give you my *besa* that you will go next week." And immediately I got better (smiles), I felt great because I said, "Bravo, I am recovering." And I remained happy all week because I would go to the dance. However, Albanian girls rarely went to the dance in those days. Usually Albanian boys, Serbian [boys] and [boys of] other nationalities went to the dance, Albanian girls now and then. Maybe my brother was a bit infuriated because he thought, "Why should it be my Albanian sister to go to the dance." When the following Saturday came and I was getting ready, now he had promised that he would let me go and I was happy, and I told my other friends, "There's no need for you to come to my house because I will meet you there." Fortunately, I had told them not to come to pick me up, because I would have gone over there, because I never went, because he came and said, "In God's honor, did you really think that I would let you go?" and I felt like bursting and I thought it really isn't worth it...

Thus, I have not experienced being at the high school dance at the time in Istog. But even when I went to the prom night, when I graduated from high school, my brother was there too. So there was this part about: whom I am dancing with, whom I am spending time with, so he was a very good brother... (smiles), but very strict. Maybe I am justifying him because we were a very small family, he had three sisters and he was an only son and maybe he was frightened, he thought, "They may stray from the path," or who knows what. I can say that he was a person who really cared about us, he watched every step we made. And this is where the period, the early youth period, ends and it was time to go to university.

I wanted to study medicine and I wanted to study music, and at one point I decided and I realized that my mother didn't interfere at all. She was a woman who talked to us all the time, she told us about the things that should be done, and the things that should not be done. What I remember about my mother is that she never said, "You're not allowed to do this." But always when I was a child, or an adult, she said, "You have no right to do this." Simply, she made me think about the right of a person... I was thinking, how come she is saying, "You have no right!" I was thinking, how come everyone else says, "You're not allowed to do this. You must do this." She always said, "You have no right to do this." So she was relying on something. And it has tailed me throughout my life, so it very hard when throughout your life you are trying to correct your own mistakes in your children or among friends, or in people you work with.

But if you truly want, in life you can correct your faults or the mistakes that have been done against you, and you don't do them to anyone. I think this is the greatest accomplishment a person can achieve.

I spoke with my mother, and mother asked, "Ola, what have you decided to study?" I said, "Well mum, I want to study medicine or music." "No, why music, better to choose medicine!" And I was always interested in that subject. And my brother of course, he wanted to drive me to Pristina to get registered and on our way there he told me, "Ola, where have you decided to register?" I said "Medicine." He said, "Oh no!" "How come?" He said, "No, you can't. You will complete medical school,

a great school, a great job, a great... I don't know what... you don't know how hard it is. And imagine, you will have to work nightshifts, who knows who you will do nightshifts with." I know it since from night that it wasn't worth debating with him and so I gave up immediately. "Good," I said, "Brother, what do you say I do?" He said, "Go to law school." I replied, "But you graduated from law school, why should I take it too, I don't like it!" "Take it!"

And when I went to law school, luckily a branch was opened... so within the law school there was... in the second year you could choose journalism or diplomacy. So I thought I will complete two years, in two years... I will somehow convince them and instead of completing law, I will switch to journalism or diplomacy. And so, I registered, and to tell you the truth, it was a wonderful time for youth, because right after graduating from university, there was a job waiting for you. If you had a good job, in a very short time you would get an apartment, it wasn't like today, when you graduate from university and there is no prospect.

When I arrived in Pristina I was lucky to find a place, because then of course the competition to get into the dormitories was high, but independently of the fact that we had good conditions, I wanted to stay in the dorms because I wanted to be with friends. And we found a way and I don't know if it was a coincidence or what... but we were all girls from Istog in our room. So, more or less I knew them. Some were older than me, and so more or less we knew each other and stayed in the dorm. We went to the lectures, so it was the time when the only entertainment in Pristina was, was the disco in Bozur, and the *korzo*. The *korzo* used to be something like Facebook nowadays, each group of friends had their own tree where they stopped, so if you were looking for someone, you knew which tree to stop at and you could find them at eight o'clock in the evening. There, like on Facebook, we all knew who is dating whom, who broke up, who went to the seaside because we could see their suntan, simple as that. When we'd come back from the seaside we'd say, "Let's go out to the *korzo* and show off our tan" (smiles). So it was a place to learn about everything that was happening.

I can tell you that I wasn't bad [looking] at all when I was young (smiles). But all my friends had... we called them *frajer*, boyfriends, not that I didn't have one, but no one was even approaching me. But I was a very strong girl, I was a girl who always knew what she wanted. And it seems that men did not appreciate my character, it scared them and they preferred softer, calmer, more... you know... Then I used to call them such "turkeys" (laughs).

And usually, when we'd walk in the street with them, every time I was with my friends, usually they would be catcalled, but not me, and I started becoming insecure. What is going on with me? All my roommates had boyfriends, I didn't. And one day there was a freshmen dance and I decided to go to it. I left lectures earlier, I did not attend the last few classes so that I could still find hot water in the dorm, that's how it was, so I could wash up and get ready. And as I was coming... I was living in the dorm number two... on my way in I saw a guy dressed very well. He wasn't good looking, but was very elegant, with a very particular taste, interestingly at that time we would classify them, the ones who dressed well, who had the means to dress well, we would say they were Serbs, and the ones who were not dressed that well, or more classic we'd say they were Albanians, and we could tell the difference in the *korzo* and everywhere. And he was dressed just like a Serb (laughs), and he had parked his car, a then *fiça*, it was a car... I think Zastava was making it or... how did they call it before? {she addresses the interviewers}, I don't know what they call it. What do they call the Italian one nowadays?

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Which one, Minimarista [Mini Morris]?

**Ola Sylja:** What do they call them?

**Donjeta Berisha:** There are still *ficas* around.

**Ola Sylja:** Agim has one now, he always had such car. Anyway ... He had one... there used to be a really small car, they used to call it *fiça*. It was really, really tiny. Nowadays, I don't think there are small cars like that, and he parked it in front of the dorm number 2, he had a flat tire and he was changing it. Upset as I was in a bad mood, I was approaching him with my friend, and I said, "Look at this fellow, parking his car in front of women's dorm, as if he had a flat tire right here?" She said, "Ola, leave him, don't tease him, you don't want to get stuck with him." I said, "No, I won't, he's a Serb." She replied, "He's not." And I addressed him in Serbian, saying, "Good young man, why are you changing the tire on *fiça*, when you get a flat tire you throw away the car, you throw it all away, and you can get a car like this at the supermarket." He replied, "Come on, try it." I said, "Oh no, in *fiça* you make bumpy children." And I continued walking and now he... unexpectedly someone called my name and spoke to me in Albanian, "Ola..." something, I can't remember what, and he finds out that I am Albanian. And he says, "Are you Albanian?" I say, "Are you Albanian?" And that is where we started talking. He got so chatty that we started teasing each other with words, and at one moment I just couldn't wait to get rid of him. Later he said, "Will you just tell me what number is your room?" because we didn't have mobile phones, internet, or anything (smiles), so it was the only way he could have contacted me. And because I wanted to get rid of him I asked him, "What is your number?" and he unbuttoned his shirt, pulled out his golden necklace and had number 13 on it, my room number was 13, and I was struck. And I told him, "My number is 13," "No joking." I said "Yes!" And he came and found me, and four years later we got married, and we recall those moments ever since.

And... after some time, after four years, in the year '78 we got married. In those times the weddings usually took place in homes or gardens. It was in rare occasions that weddings took place in restaurants. But for his family, this was the greatest joy. The oldest son, they liked the bride, they were happy. And they wanted to organize a wedding in a restaurant, and they did it in a disco, so it was the place where we went when we were young. Of course it was mine and Agim's, my husband's, decision. And when we started preparing, it was the custom for the bride... no matter if they were modern or traditional, the customs were always the same. *Petka* were sent to the bride, which included the veil and entire sets, which meant... it meant the more sets [of clothes] you sent to the bride, the richer you were. So it was from seven sets to twelve or who knows. And with Agim we wanted to find the veil and everything together, and I was with Agim, we were both around the same height. And I always had the creativity to do something that... not to do something impossible or something that had to be done, but within my possibilities, I was always trying to do something better.

And so I decided that if I, myself and the veil then, plus the hairstyle, plus the heels, imagine to enter the wedding, if it was held in the house maybe it would not be noticed, but if you go to a restaurant to have the wedding, when we enter, how am I going to enter as a bride, one head taller than my husband. So what was I to do...? Discreetly I went to buy white sandals. And we used to call them "romans," because they were very flat, to the ground and just had stripes. I found them white and hid them in my bag. So they were at the bottom of my dowry. And now... on the women's day at my place, the *kanagjegj* and all that, me all the time... no one had seen them, just me.

When I went to prepare, I had found one, what we called before *tokice*, it was just connected to the hair here {holds her hair to illustrate}, with a net in the front, which did not add up to my height. My hair down... tied and high heels, so this was for... as we used to say in the past, "for the pictures" both in my mother's place and in my mother-in-law's place. But in the evening we wanted to go to the wedding reception and I pulled the *tokice* lower {shows with her hands}, I put my hair down, took off



my shoes, the dress was very long no one could notice and I put on my roman sandals. Then I showed Agim, "Agim here are these," he shrugged his shoulders, most likely he felt good, I think for him I was always... I have always surprised him, he never surprised me (smiles).

And when we entered the room, I swear that everyone was waiting excitedly thinking, "Ha!" Knowing our mentality they couldn't wait for women to start talking, "Ah, now when Ola enters, she will be one head taller than Agim." And at that time, I can say we could probably count the weddings on one hand, our wedding in Pristina was the third or fourth. So there were no opportunities for us to copy someone, we just did what we had in our mind. And we were both similar in personality, we always were interested to look at our own comfort and do what we pleased, we were not interested in others' business or what others had to say or what they could have said. And we held hands and we entered the room, and all of them, I remember Ismet Bogujevci was singing the song, "*E hajde nuse, e hajde!*" [Come one bride, come!] He had dedicated it to us, who were entering the room. Everyone in the room was clapping hands {claps hands}, when we entered they sat down, calmed down (laughs). They must have thought, what happens now?

Agim was wearing shoes, Italian leather shoes with a bit of a heel {shows the height of heel with her hand}, they were popular at that time, not cowboy boots but a more classical model. That was the fashion. And I flat like that {stretches hands in parallel}, and with the means we had, we did very well. And... the wedding, like any other wedding, was over but what I was struggling with, and which came difficult to me was that I was brought up in an intellectual family where only necessary customs and traditional practices were followed, not necessarily to the tiny detail like the [custom for the] bride to kiss hands, the bride to stand up and all others... However, to tell you the truth, when I got married I was 23 years old and I found trying all those things amusing. I was thinking, "Why shouldn't I try it?" You know, wearing *dimija*, *à la turka*, kiss hands – I made a stunt of it all, I was rehearsing. And... I did it all well, so another period was over.

## Mother

Then in '79, our first son Valon was born. It's the moment when I felt happiness that I had never felt before in my life. And I was very happy because it was a boy (laughs), and I would be lying if I told you that I wished my first born was a girl, because given the suffering I had gone through with my brother, I always thought, "God, Inshallah, I never give birth to girls, (laughs) just to boys." And it's strange that God did not bless me with 15 girls, but with two sons, you know to have them... although I miss them now, but nonetheless... {spreads her arms} it's important to have... you know... to give birth, to experience the feeling of motherhood, every other thing is much different.

And then big changes started in... I mean, from '79, '80, '81, changes began in our society.

In '79 my first child Valon was born, and in '82 my second son was born. The unrest in Kosovo had already begun. So all that we had until then... let me call it cohabitation started falling apart. Until those moments, until that year we were everywhere, we were going together, I mean, coffee shops, *korzo*, our friendships, nothing was separate, even marriage, until then youngsters would marry other ethnicities, so there wasn't anything difficult, or dramatic that could happen. I mean, we were not preoccupied with these problems. And in '82 they started separating, I mean, they started... most of the men were left without jobs then, usually only women were working. It was men who were fired from their jobs, they started slowly from '82 until '90s it was a period when days got harder, one after another.

But, what happened to me, something that I experienced more heavily than the others, was because I was a child of a mixed marriage because my father was Albanian, a patriot, a good man, a very dear

man who contributed for the national cause. He married a Montenegrin woman and simply we started feeling it... not as a problem, but you simply felt somewhat different from the others though I, or my family, we never felt it because she was our mother. And in no given moment did we run into an issue when she could have said for example, "I want to run away from here, or to do something, far from here." However the *rreth*, the *rreth* in which we lived, they were looking at us with some skepticism, as in what is to be done with us.

Mother was a very wise, hardworking, smart and loving woman, who after her husband's death had made a vow to her husband that she would educate all his children, and would forever look after his family because my father was a single child. My mother was also a single child, she simply dedicated her life to my father while he was alive and then to his family and us. And I remember when during this war they burned down our house, the first house to be burned probably because it was always a target, similarly even in '82 when my brother was imprisoned for political reasons, although there may have been no reason for him to go, but because he was persecuted then, the regime of the time could hardly wait for some unrest to happen [so they could] put away people who were an obstacle or who were progressive or who were working for the national cause.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Why did they politically persecute your brother?

**Ola Sylja:** Well, they persecuted him because he most likely continued in the footsteps of my father, who was perhaps working [for the cause] and they stopped him. I mean, he died very young and they thought that he passed on to my brother [the task] to follow in his path, I mean to work for the national cause.

My brother used to work as a counselor in the Executive Council and then to get rid of the people who were in the Executive Council they probably went to him first. They always acted in a way, they started to get rid of the small ones to eventually get rid of the big ones. And at that time they sentenced him with five years of imprisonment because allegedly he read the book *Titistët* [Titoists]. He was in Pristina, then they transferred him to Prizren and he could never rehabilitate from imprisonment afterwards. Although he was released from prison, he did not have the right afterwards... [his] field... he was a lawyer and he was qualified as a solicitor, he was qualified as a solicitor but had no right to open his solicitor office. Even if he opened one, no Albanian for example could come to get solicitor services from him, because he was in the list of "unreliable" people.

And so, he was forced to open a photocopy shop, which means that he did something completely different from the field in which he was qualified and which he could have worked otherwise. And then during the war it was very interesting, beside the fact that we were all persecuted because we were Albanian, my mother was persecuted as well, the Serbs from Istog were looking for her, because she was problematic for them. She educated, schooled her Albanian children, brought them up as Albanian and that simply bothered Serbs, and they called my mother to kill her. When they didn't find her, then they burned down our house.

And I remember when after the war we returned to Istog, we begged our mother, since our house was burned down to the ground and where was she to start afresh now, she was 70 years old and as I said my sister was also ill. My brother had gone to France as a refugee and had remained there, because he knew that even if returned after all the trauma connected to all the things that he survived, it would be too difficult to get back on track, therefore he remained there. My mother and my sister who was disabled, they remained in Istog and had to live [there]. My sister and I, we begged our mother to come to Pristina to live close to us. We could afford to buy a small apartment so she could be close to

us, but she said, “I don’t want to come to Pristina because I promised Rexha” my father, “that the chimney of his house will always be smoking, and his door will never be closed.”

And she returned after the war and we built her an auxiliary house that had one room, one kitchen, and she lived there until her death. So, she died ten years ago and I remember in the last moment, after we returned, around year 2000, 2004, I was often teasing her, I would say, “Mom, how do you feel when you know you are the only Montenegrin in the municipality of Istog?” And she would say, “I feel very good, because I am in my *rreth*. I have come here very young and I don’t know of any family other than this one here.”

Most likely she could have then, when she was widowed, she was a 36 year old woman, most likely she could have taken us and gone somewhere else. Her brothers were outside Kosovo, one was in Belgrade, the other was in Italy, and the other one had died but left his family there. Most certainly, it would have been easier if she got us all and went to live with her family, but she never did it. She always reminded us that we are Albanian, we must marry Albanians, and we definitely must marry Albanians. And often I told her, “But in your times you chose whom you loved, why are you influencing us now?” “Yes,” she would say, “it’s good for people to go back to that part of theirs” [inc.].

Truly as children, of course I would not have given one finger of my mother’s hand, but for the people around, it was really hard. During the unrest of ’81 for example, it was my mother that was being judged. After the war, again my mother was being judged, first she was being judged by Serbs, and then she was being judged by Albanians. But to the people who knew her, the ones who knew about her, she was most likely a very appreciated woman whom they respected a lot. And when she died, during the funeral, I remember how very scared she was ... she would say, “The situation has changed now, my friends and your father’s friends have died. There is no... these young people, they may or may not know one [Serb].” But, taking into consideration the way she brought us up, the way she schooled us all in Albanian, most likely at that time she gained the trust and love of the circle. Of course she was buried with my father, next to my father in Istog and she had a magnificent funeral, which impressed us as well. Therefore I think that when people want to do good, and when you want to act the right way, most certainly the people around you will understand and will accept you the way you should be accepted.

What my mother has influenced most, what I could take away from her, even though she was a calm and wise woman... what has impressed me most since childhood that I remembered from her has been that no matter how much work was involved in minding us, she was 36 years old alone with four children, she worked afterwards. She got employed to be able to take care of us. She always had time for us, every time we asked for something, she sat down with us, never spoke to us from the height of a parent whom you should listen to or do something without fail if she said so. Somehow she always sat vis-à-vis us and spoke to us.

Before we went to sleep she would always tell us stories and I remember four stories that now I know she was telling us for a reason. So there was one story that she always told us about women’s awareness. How a woman should be a good housewife, a good mother, a good wife. I don’t want to take time now to tell the whole story. Then, the other story that she was telling us about the courage that woman should always be independent, if she is materially independent and makes her own choices she will most certainly be valued by the *rreth*. And these are some things that we have inherited from her, from her stories, from her life.

And I remember when I became a mother and my children were 16 years old, they are three years apart. It was the adolescent age that I was always dreading if I’d make it through. On top of it, it was

the difficult time of the '90s, when kids would go out and we didn't know if they'd be back. They would be either harassed by police or we didn't dare to... simply we were not free to go out during those times. Then I would phone my mother and would say to her, "Mother what should I do? What should I do, because I am afraid? How did you manage to bring us up like this, four children on your own, without any support in life? And we always listened to you, even if we were at the end of the world far away from you..."

## Activism

*[Part of the interview cut out from the video: the interviewer asks the speaker to talk about her activism during the '90s.]*

**Ola Sylja:** Those were the '90s... I mean, of course it is understood what the situation was then, everything was ruined, everything started taking another direction, and mainly because there were no families with any men working. For example out of my entire family and my husband's family, only my husband was working. He used to work in Kosova B and there was need for staff, so they could not afford to let him go. I mean, there was no substitute for him, he wasn't being kept for any other reason, so Agim was the only working person in his family, which had three brothers and one sister, and in my father's family, my brother and sisters. I mean, he was the only one of two families who was employed. And then we started, it was usually women who were securing income. The women started engaging in different activities straight away.

In one occasion, in the year '94-'95, one of my friends, Flora Macula, who is nowadays a strong activist, called me and said, "Ola, we are organizing some debates for women. Will you come?" And I was unemployed, so why not? Why not go to...? And those four years were very good, because we were organizing women who'd come every time, I mean, every Saturday, I mean, four times a month, debates for women were organized to discuss different topics, usually they were topics that give courage to women who had to look after the family, who had to face the times as they were, for example, topics such as, "How to argue wisely?" or, "How to be more tolerant?"

Usually the organizers, I mean, the so-called project was being funded by "SOROS" and we were getting together. The first time we organized it, for example, a smaller number of women showed up, but as years passed more of them started coming. And it was a time when we really made a contribution to women because they had nothing to do, they had no jobs, so why not meet and discuss our problems that we were facing. I remember around the year... from '94 until the beginning of '99 we held those debates, and then we started organizing them secretly, because we thought that if the police found out where we were, they could come and move us out of there. And one day as we started, seven or eight policemen entered the venue and although we were all women, they did not ask what we were doing or anything, they just started throwing out the papers where we were. The people who were speaking in the debates, I mean, in most cases were doctors to provide medical advice for women, and they moved us out of there. They behaved very badly and it was the first time that I experienced violence from the year '81 until '99. I mean, we experienced it ourselves and learned what it was like.

Then in fact in the year '99, at the beginning of the year '99, when they moved us out of there, we did not have any other opportunities to meet again. I did not meet those women anymore, then a sort of a fear began spreading, it got into the family, and then we were thinking what we should do if the war really happened.

In 2001-2002, meaning in the year 2000, my childhood friend Drita, whose brother was murdered during the war and was buried in Krusha e Madhe, she asked me and I was jobless, I was at home and she asked me and sad, "Ola," she said, "Will you come to accompany me so I can go and visit my brother's grave." She went often, and of course she was a childhood friend, we were very close friends, Drita Berisha. And I would go with her, I wouldn't let her go on her own. And we went to Krusha e Madhe, it was the first time I heard about that place, I never knew that place existed. She was from Prizren and given that her brother was fighting during the war, he was murdered somewhere close to Prizren and during the war they buried him in Krusha e Madhe. And as we were coming back from the graves all those houses there, the village was burnt down, you could smell ashes, and you could smell death. To put it simply, we just couldn't wait to get out from that village and into the road [inc.]... because it was so gloomy to stay in that place.

At one point she told me, "Ola, I want to go to the house of people who have helped bury my brother during the war." When we entered, it was the house of the family Zeqiri, and we entered it. This was the only family that perhaps was not affected by the war, because the brothers and father were abroad and the rest of the family got abroad straight away through family reunion programs, they left. And young girls started coming and telling and when we were coming back from that family, coming to Pristina she said, "Come on Ola, let's do something for these women." Initially I had no idea what we could do because I was thinking how we can get in the middle of that flame, of that pain, of that fire. I didn't feel strong enough, not strong enough to be able to give something to contribute to them, to help them.

In that exact moment I thought of my mother who was widowed at the age of 36, completely alone in this world... without another mentality. And she knew how to bring her family to the shore as we say, three daughters and a son, and so I thought, "Why can't every woman do that?" And I said to Drita, "Yes Drita, we will do something." So we started with projects, the first project sometime around the year 2000. During that time, the projects were usually imposed. They were awareness raising projects, so to speak, health education, sewing, but you can't say that they weren't good projects because during the implementation of those projects, we identified the needs of these women, we found out what they needed to do. So while we were implementing a sewing project, when I was bringing the materials for sewing, along with wool and threads, I was supposed to get a signature from them, they were going "You sign it," "You sign it," and I noticed that they had problems with reading and writing, most of them. And what was most interesting was that women of my age, so to speak the mothers, knew reading and writing, but not the young girls. The reason they didn't know reading and writing was because during the '90s, when all the schools got closed, these girls had to go and finish primary and high school in private homes. And as it usually happens around here, if that home or whatever it is further away, you think how to go to someone else's house... so most of the girls did not attend school. They went to first and second grade, and stopped their schooling and they did not know reading and writing.

And then, to do something more for them, they were actually all housewives. They were... Krusha e Madhe is mainly agricultural and I didn't know what to do with them. What can I do, something to...? And one day I had a project that I could not finish during all day long and I decided to stay overnight there. And when we sat down, they served us dinner, I am very passionate about cuisine and I love cuisine (smiles) and I thought that no one can make pickles better than me. But, when I took those pickles, I tasted a taste I've never tried until then... they were somehow better, so it was a very old recipe but very tasty, very good. And the very moment I ate those pickles, I asked, "Who made these?" but they said, "The entire Krusha makes them like this." "Where do you get them, how do you make them?" She said, "We all make our own peppers and we all have very old recipe, that we have

inherited from our grandmothers to be able to preserve the peppers for winter.” I did not think of it straight away, but while doing the projects, the women attending different trainings, one day they told me, “Ola, can you do a project for us so we can earn something, we need to work? Only work can save us, it can take away the pain we’re feeling.”

And I thought of it, I took those peppers and I brought them home. When I brought them home, I invited my friends, the circumstances were better than they are now, we were working, our sons were working, the majority was working. So I invited them, I made homemade bread and simply promoted those pickles, and, “Oh they’re great, oh they’re great...” I said, “Do you want me to bring them and sell them to you?” “Yes, will they make them for us?” I said, “Yes, sure they will.” And the following day I went there straightaway and told them to prepare five hundred kilograms of pickles for the fall. It was August, so it was just the time when they were starting the preservation of the pickles and they filled one big barrel, which I brought with me and sold it immediately.

I invited the women who had placed orders, they all took it and were very pleased. Then I thought that I could do something regarding this activity, but again in order to give them training on preservation, we had to provide them with some additional trainings on how to start a business, they were women that didn’t know reading and writing. They simply didn’t know, the communication with them was very difficult, more or less not because they were housewives, but because they were women who had their lives, had their children and you can’t say they were unknowing, but simply, the losses that they had experienced, because Krusha was a living proof of war massacres.

And then I was forced to do my research, to do some projects to raise their awareness. Then we started the reading/writing project that was financed by UNICEF, Soros, UNESCO, where a woman with UNESCO who had extensive experience came. She was a doctor of informal education. And she taught us how to make a book, where beside what they could learn reading and writing, they could learn other things. You know, it was then that the project was separated into levels. The first level was reading and writing; the second level was women’s awareness raising, meaning who am I...women’s rights, family, health; and at the end, the fourth book was about economic development. I mean, women’s awareness raising how to start a ... [inc.] business, I mean, to offer them an opportunity or an understanding that they could do something the next day or the day after, they could sell what they prepare for their families, more or less what is left over in order to gain some income to be able to provide for their family.

Therefore I then took part and was one of the six authors of the book for reading and writing and this course was delivered over seven years. In the meantime, while they were becoming more aware we had already started our activities. I mean, I went there the following year, I found organizations that were funding agricultural development and this suited me. It was the Swiss organization Intercooperation, which was funding projects for agricultural development and so I decided to do vegetable processing given that they were producing the raw material themselves. We started the following year, it was 2001, when I was invited to participate in a fair, it was the first fair after the war, an international one where I participated with this product and I won the golden medal for idea and quality.

This was a motivation for me to be able to help those women. My friend Drita, unfortunately for family reasons, she had some trouble in the family and with health so... she withdrew, and I was left on my own to continue my work there. So I was thinking, let me do this one more thing, this one more thing and things were done, and done, but simply I got connected with Krusha e Madhe, with those women and I wanted to make it clear to them that they can do things. I mean, not only with them, but always in life I have tried to make something with available resources, because other resources, if you were to

go to search for them to make something more, you always run into someone else who either does not understand you or has no resources. Therefore, I...the requests of the women of Krusha, used my abilities to find different donors to help them. And we started... initially we sold five hundred kilograms in one day, then at the fair we sold one thousand and two hundred kilograms in one week. The following year it was three thousand kilograms and so on.

I told you already Krusha e Madhe is famous for producing pickles, for processing vegetables, because usually in Krusha e Madhe there are less fruits and more vegetables. I have always thought, in fact I have always said that as a non-governmental organization I have never thought that women of Krusha should work through my organization. I mean [I didn't think for] me to be the head who decided how the business should go, where the women should be, I will lead you. I always wanted to build their skills to the extent that they could open [a business] themselves the next day. And I said, in Krusha e Madhe there are three workshops where women work independently, I mean that they don't need my assistance. There is a group of women that I continue to assist to this date because they don't have any men at home. They are women who still, I mean children... the eldest son in the house is 21 years old, he is studying and maybe he has no time to get engaged in this, but I help them out.

And I am happy because whether they acknowledge it or not, if one jar of processed fruit or vegetables is produced in Kosovo I know that it is my merit, because for seven years, from 2000 to 2007 I have worked without any competition. It was God's miracle because all the funding, all the money that was earned has gone to Krusha e Madhe. Women have used that money to build their homes, to school their children, to improve their lives. And what is more important, very often, when we talked, they would tell me, "Oh Ola, if we had our husbands they would have taken our money away, because even in the past when we worked, we made our produces, they sold them in the village, but when they came back they would not give us all our money. They would give us some, and would keep some." This was a small joke, which most likely they were using to minimize their absence, because women who until the day before did not go out of their homes, now they were engaged in business. They started an activity to create income for themselves.

What was important is that they could manage it very well. To mothers it did not make a difference whether the boy or girl should be in school. So they used that money to equally educate girls and boys. Their great pain, their loss, of course I could never fill... just like I could never, ever fill the absence of my parents. However, they found themselves in the work, nonetheless it was little easier for them to live and to create. And often, when I go and spend time with them now, we recall those moments in the beginning and they laugh, but I remember those moments most and I can never forget them. The first couple of years we could not work at all until we, they... I had the patience to listen to them while they were crying and mourning their family members whom they had no more.

The pain that I have relived now again is when one of those mothers whose two sons have been murdered and are missing - and one of them has been found, but two others are still missing, including her husband, she died six months ago and did not live to find out the fate of my [slip of the tongue, "her"] sons - I always remember her words, when I greeted her, she was always looked the garden gate. When we fell asleep, when I visited her for leisure, before she went to sleep she would go to the garden, regardless of the weather, she'd turn her head towards the big wooden garden gates, and would tell me, "Ola, I can never go to sleep without first checking if maybe my sons are coming back." She was saving them in a... suitcase (sighs), when she was a refugee in Albania, she brought her three sons T-shirts. For years those T-shirts, the 14 years now that she was alive, they got stuck [to each other] and she would not let anyone unfold them because she would say, "I brought these for them and I will give it to them."

I mean, the same pain was repeated again when aunt Kimet died and she did not get to learn the fate of her sons. But there are children now, each girl who was then two to three years old is now 17-18 years old, they've enrolled in university. What I remember best after all this work that I have given and that we have worked together is when the first wedding started in Krusha e Madhe, because the custom there has it that girls of Krusha don't take off their black clothes until they are married. And when the first girl from my group of girls got married, I was used to always see her with black trousers and a black top, tied hair, no make-up, nothing. And when I went to see her as a bride, I was amazed when I saw her. She was completely different, with white, pink clothes, the ones that brides wear, with make-up and all done up, but the moment we saw each other, we started to cry and laugh all of the sudden, I mean, we were sharing [cries and laughers] (smiles).

As a matter of fact as a non-governmental organization I have achieved my goal in Krusha e Madhe. I wanted those women to be aware, to be empowered and to return to their lives to the extent possible and I have achieved this. But, I am still connected to them, Krusha e Madhe is my second family so to speak. Trust me, when I am most worried it is because I miss it... currently my two sons, one works in Belgrade, the other one is living in Canada, he's gone... my younger son has been there for the last three years. Would you believe that when I miss my sons, the only warmth and joy I can feel, is when I go amongst those women. You know it is my second family where I live and think I will cooperate with them until I die.

## Professional Life

*[Part of the interview cut out from the video: the interviewer asks the speaker to talk about her professional life.]*

**Ola Sylja:** I don't know why, maybe because of the manners that my mother taught me or the way she has dedicated all her life to us and she was a very committed mother, I don't know why, only in the '80s, when my children grew up, that is when I started thinking that I might start working. In my calling as a journalist I could not work, there was no chance to work, but I looked at possibilities of getting employed in anything that I could do, or any job that I could find. And then, with the help of some friends at the time, I got employed in Kosovo Bank. It was called BanKos then, and we worked. During that period we were together and then things started happening, divisions, the disagreement... they started gathering, Serbs would gather in one group, we Albanians remained where we were. I always had the impression that we were never the people who have caused that division. We were never people who were scared of them. We simply stayed with them, and we wanted to stay with them to the very last moment. Maybe because we did not have any bad or rotten intentions, but simply they started to divide and to...

At the time when the miners entered the mineshaft, of course we went out to show solidarity and we went out. We dared not to go out of work, BanKos used to be by the traffic lights where the Grand Hotel is now. And of course we dared not to go out, it was risky, we knew that if we went out, we would lose our jobs. Nonetheless, we showed our solidarity and went out to the BanKos terrace on the side, by the road where other protesters were passing by. And surely, the next day they waited for us at the door and told us that we are not allowed to enter the workplace anymore.

I don't know why I started telling you previously why I did not work until then, because I wanted very much to dedicate myself to the children and I always said, I won't start working until my children go to school. And when my son was... the eldest, in the fourth grade, the youngest was in the first grade,



then naturally I started working but it seems like it was a period, I got past that period with much difficulty, so maybe I did not get more work experience than that before the war.

## War

*[Part of the interview cut out from the video: the interviewer asks the speaker to talk about her experiences during the war in 1999.]*

**Ola Sylja:** I remember when I was little, when I asked my mother to tell me stories, I'd say, "Mom, tell me about the war in your time, because we have nothing to tell about now? Nothing is happening, and you most certainly have what to tell, there was a war back then and what was it like to survive the war?" And I will never forget when she told me, "Oh my daughter, a time will come when you get tired of everything and you find freedom in war. Then you will find yourself more free and comfortable in war than to stay closed at home, or to live through the violence that the regime commits." And in year '99 I remember I was in the apartment in Dardania where I am today, and the bombing started. All day long my husband and sons would stay locked in the house, it was I who went out to get supplies. I would buy bread, flour, oil, sugar, thinking that we would stay home, we did not dare go out, so children would at least have what to eat. We filled the freezer to the brim, there was no more...it wouldn't fit any more bread or anything. You know we were afraid. It never crossed our minds that we would get out of our home and leave everything.

But a moment in the morning arrived when we couldn't stay anymore, paramilitaries began wandering around the apartments. They started knocking on the doors, shouting in the entrances, and then we were not safe anymore. And one day, it was most likely, it was *Bajram* and I wanted to go out before it was over... I am that kind of person that has those feelings although it was very difficult. I mean, one day before we left home I cooked the *Bajram* lunch, even though it is not a custom for *Bajram* I opened a bottle of wine, and got together my husband, my two sons. We sat at the table, we ate the *Bajram* lunch, and I thought that I should have a toast with juice therefore I opened a bottle of wine which I was saving for special occasions. I opened it, we filled our glasses and I forced them to stand up, to clink the glasses and make a vow that in the next *Bajram* we would all be together at this table, safe and sound! And we did this and the following day we packed...

It was very interesting, that feeling that I am telling you about. My sister-in-law who had left a couple of days before me, phoned me from Macedonia and told me, "Ola please, dress up well! Dress well, tidy up yourself, put make-up on and put on your best looking clothes. Because if you are dressed up well and you're looking good, it will be easier to cross through check points." So it was like, if there was a woman from the village, ignorant, or uneducated, then they would harass her to the end. While a woman who is, or looks more emancipated, they had some consideration. Now this was something that old women say, "The one who's being killed, holds on to foam." And we were trying to do everything to save our lives, and that's what I did. My father-in-law who came with us and most likely he thought he would be safer with us because we had elder children, and he came to us and said, "Anywhere you go, I am coming with you."

And the following day, nearly everyone in the building, we got ready, as if we were going to a wedding. We got in, took the basic things we had and we left. We didn't know where we were going, but we wanted to run away from Pristina, go abroad somewhere. The main goal was to get to Macedonia

because we heard that people could go to Macedonia and could find shelter there, and so we began our journey.

When we arrived to the street where you can either take the turn to Brezovica, or you can continue the road to Skopje, we ran into a checkpoint, whether they were soldiers or paramilitary, I can't remember now, but they were dressed as soldiers. And they, as we were the last ones in a line of 25 cars, they stopped our car last and my husband rolled down the window. When he rolled down the window, he started hitting my husband with the butt of the gun. I was sitting in the front, the only woman, while my sons and my father-in-law were in the back. Before we had left I had thought, if by any chance they were to take away my sons I will throw myself to the policeman, he would get scared of me and he would kill me and that way I will not see when he takes away my sons, and that's what I was going to do. But what happened was that he came towards my husband's window and my husband opened the window thinking that it was a routine check, which we must go through, and he started hitting him with the butt of the machinegun. And he started talking in Serbian shouting and saying, "What are you thinking?" "You want to run away from Kosovo, my children to get poisoned here, my children to be killed here!"

And my husband curled up and he started hitting him so much that I was afraid that he's hurt so much and there would be no one to drive the car afterwards. My father-in-law was old, my sons who were still minors, we would just remain there, we would have to start walking on foot or else, we did not know what to do. And per usual, I, Ola who fears no one, I opened my door, got out and turned to him above the car, and I addressed him in perfect, very good Serbian and told him, "Why are you hitting him? You're both hitting him, and you're telling him 'Go!' Stop. While you're hitting him, he won't be able to leave. Wait, move, we'll get in the car and we'll go to where we're heading." And when he saw me speaking Serbian and I was dressed so well that I think I had never dressed better than that day, indeed he stopped and said, "Then head towards Albania." And they made us go through Shtërpçë, Brezovica, towards the Sharr Mountains.

I can't describe the experience that we went through those mountains. At the moment when they stopped us and started beating my husband, all those cars scattered, like ants. I mean we were left in the middle of the street, only our car. Simply we got off the car line, we got off from everyone, we were left alone. As we were passing through the road, we didn't know the road, because everything was mixed up, smoke all over the place. People were passing with, I didn't know if they were... I just got confused, it was a kind of horror. It was around eleven, twelve noon, but it seemed to me like it was dark, smoke all around.

When we arrived in Shtërpçë, I believe that to this date passing through that road, was... it is hard because it is a part where there are fewer Albanians, let alone during wartime. But I don't know, we just drove straight without stopping, and when we arrived in the Sharr Mountains there was a long line. I met with some people who were not in the same car line we were in, police stopped us again and asked, "Where are you heading to, where are you going to?" We said, "We don't know. We were expelled from our apartments, we are out, now we will go anywhere you tell us to, what to do..." And one of the policemen told me, "Why are you going to Albania? Once you go there, it will be worse than here." I just shrugged my shoulders and had no words, no strength to speak or anything. Simply I was just looking for a way forward to run away, to save ourselves.

And with thousands of difficulties, we got to the border. When we arrived to the border with Albania, there was no one from Prizren there. Our car was the first one to stop in front... in front of the border. We stayed there for half an hour, there was no one there, we did not dare go out, go in, or talk. We remained there because we simply didn't know what to do. At one point a customs official came out

and I got all mixed up, I didn't know any more if they were speaking Albanian, Serbian, or what was he. They all seemed the same.

And simply, when we stopped before the border, he came and requested documents from us. He requested documents from us, I told my husband in Albanian, "Agim, if he asks for money, please let's give it to him, let's just get out of here." He answered in Albanian and said, "Don't worry, we don't need your money, just give us your documents, all you have." As I got down... to bend to get the passports out of the bag, I told my husband, "Give him the ID cards, don't give him the passports." But he did not let us pass through until he took every paper we had in the bag. He opened my bag, took out ID cards, took out the passport, took out business cards, I mean, everything that was a written piece of paper, he took it from us. Same from my sons, from my husband, from everyone. And we got out. The road between borders, from the Kosovo border to the Albanian border to get to the other side to Kukës, has been for me the longest road I could ever experience or imagine in my life. When we were driving in our car, I mean in that border area, it seemed to me that the earth, the mountains were moving underneath, while we were getting somewhere, but I didn't know where we were going to.

At the Albanian border I saw something shining, it was them... as we were entering, we were the first ones to have crossed the border. It seems like they were different journalists, who were taking pictures with their flashlights or who knows. And when we entered, we opened our doors and everyone went out their way. My husband set on one side, the boys on one side, the father-in-law on one side and we all stopped, we did not know what we were doing. Some journalists came, they asked us if knew English, I told them, "My son knows. Valon, the eldest." He did not want to talk, he did not want to answer anything, basically he was not ready to say anything. Then we went, we stopped and they asked us where we want to go. Fortunately my sister was living and her husband was working in Tirana, and we decided to go to Tirana.

When we arrived there, a man asked, "Where do you want to go?" We said, "Well, to Tirana." "Don't take a chance to leave tonight because it is very dangerous, it's a long road, it's dark. Just find a shelter somewhere in Kukës." I didn't know anyone in Kukës to go to, and so we went to a shop to get some water, and to take a little break. To tell you the truth maybe I went there during the '90s. In '95 I went to visit my sister in Albania, but I only knew Tirana, I had no one in Kukës. And we stopped close to a shop, where a family said, "I am sorry, I don't have where to place you because I have a very small apartment. But I can let you stop here tonight to stay in your car, in my garden where you will be safe." When it started getting dark, it seems that after all they felt sorry and around eight o'clock in the evening, they invited us to go into their home.

After half an hour the flow of refugees started coming after us. I mean they were of Kosovar origin and seemingly the families with whom they had contact started arriving, started coming. The house was filled with people. At one moment I got out of the room, just to walk a bit because I hadn't for a while... I had been sitting in the car. I heard a crying voice, a man's voice, something like a mourning cry. And I got scared, what if... what happened, what is going on. When I got inside I saw my husband. He was crying like a child and I just stopped and looked at him, the two boys were curled up and snuggled next to him. My father-in-law's chin was shaking and he was looking at his crying son. I just turned and said, "Why are you crying? Why are you screaming?" He said to me, "What do you mean Ola, can't you see that everything we had, everything we made in life, we left it." I said, "What does it matter? We have brought up our sons, you have your husband, [slip of the tongue, "father"] your family. And what about me, who I don't know... (cries) where my mother is, where my family is and you should be happy that at least your close family is with you and you are safe."

Then the head of the house entered and said to my husband, “You have the greatest wealth there can be in life. You have a wife *burrnore*.” (cries) So it came back... my mother’s word, which she told me when I was a child, “My son!” So, I’ve always taken it into account that if I am going through hardship, through difficult times in life, I must be, I must stay strong to overcome those problems, to overcome the challenges that life brings.

When the evening arrived and we had to go to sleep and I don’t know why, to this date, the woman of the house took me in to sleep in the room with her. And I lied down to sleep with her, she brought me some food to eat {wipes her tears}. She had made a stew with chicken skin, so there was not meat either, there was just skin. It was some kind of *çervish* but my throat had closed, I couldn’t eat or anything. I saved myself, but I was now worried about my family – where is my mother, where is my ill sister, where is my brother, what will happen, when we’ll we get back, what will happen now!

And she begged me, “Come on, wash your hands and eat some food!” At that time I had much, as it was a custom to bring golden jewelry and I had saved it, and all my bracelets were golden. Everything golden that I had, I had it under the sweater that I was wearing. And when I reached out my hand like this {reaches hands} to wash them, the gold showed up, and I immediately felt sorry for them because they were a really poor family. You know, I saw it based on the place they offered and on the fact that they did not have food to give us, so just when I reached to wash my hands, I pulled down my sleeves, and she pretended she had not seen me. When we woke up in the morning, with what they had, she had bought us water, some bread, a little bit of cheese, two apples in a plastic bag for us to take on the road.

I asked my husband to leave them some money, we were using Deutschemark then, I said, “Agim, at least fifty euro,” we didn’t have more to give them because they saved us by letting us stay here, we calmed down, we had a rest, at least a little bit but she would not agree to take it. And then I had a very beautiful ring, the biggest I ever had. My brother-in-law had bought it for my 38<sup>th</sup> birthday and it had 38 stones. It was my dearest ring, the most beautiful. And so, the bride was pregnant (cries), and when I saw that she did not want to take money I took the ring and I gave it to her. “No, no,” she would not take it all. Then I pleaded with her, “Please, I want to give you this ring. Not to make up for your kindness to us, but I want you to give this ring as a present to the child whom you will give birth to. When it grows up, let it be a present from me, a remembrance from me.”

And we got out of there, we went to Tirana. My sister was waiting for us there, after some time we started going out to town to find out what has happened, where are they, where is everyone. And just before coming back, a little before the troops entered, the ground troops, I mean, the opportunity for us to return back, then I heard that my mother and sister are alive. She is in my brother’s apartment in Pristina. My brother has gone to France with his family, and to tell you the truth I got so relieved and at the first opportunity to come back, we requested to come back. No one wanted to, we had no wishes to go elsewhere, we wanted to go back to the country, because when they took all our documents, he said, “What are you worrying about? Why... why are you giving me all the documents, when you will not be coming back anyway?” And very convincingly I told him, “What do you mean not coming back? I will come back in two weeks!” I did not come back in two weeks’ time (laughs), but I came back in around two months’ time. So to say we got out around the end of March and we came back straight around 29 June.

It was very interesting when we decided, I mean, we decided to come back at the first opportunity. But, the return was the greatest joy then. On the road we would meet with people whom we had not seen for several... I would meet neighbors, “Where are you? What have you been doing?” I mean, people whom even though I didn’t know, or knew them very little, felt very close. When we came back,

we passed through Prizren, we could hear music, we could hear people walking in the streets, cheering... It was a great pleasure when we arrived around ten, eleven at night. We got into our home, the door was locked, not broken. And I thought that no one had broken in and I got my key to open the door, when I realized that lock had been broken, it had been changed. Someone had been living in my apartment. And we opened the door, we got in. We broke it, I broke the door to get into my own home and when we got inside, it was chaos.

The house was full of other people's belongings that were not mine: clothes, technical stuff [gadgets], different alcoholic drinks, many, many, many, something like... I just couldn't differentiate my things from the foreign things that were there. The children were petrified, they could not stay there and since I knew that children are... my mother is in Pristina, in my brother's apartment in Ulpiana. I told my husband to send them over there so we could sort out the house. And I took all those things that did not belong to me, I took them and put them in the hallways next to the lift. And as I was taking those things out, I was saying to myself, "Oh look this is Fetija's vacuum cleaner. Oh this belongs to this person." I mean everything belonged to the neighbors, they had taken and gathered everything and then classified them to take things that they needed, or they didn't. Or maybe we unexpectedly returned (laughs) and they did not get the chance to take all the things.

And I took those things out and started to clean up the house. I had missed going out to my balcony which I love and always when I have something, when I want to think about something or when I have to make a decision about something, I usually go out on the balcony, I smoke a cigarette and make myself a [cup of] coffee and go out there. And more or less when I made my house a home, I cleaned it and got rid of... it felt like it had a completely different smell, you know when someone else lives in and simply nothing resembles my home. And we relaxed, my husband and I, and at around 12, midnight, we opened a beer each, we found them in the fridge. The beer was unopened so we weren't afraid to drink it (smiles). And we sat in the balcony, and it was then, every night since we had returned, a helicopter was flying around... what do I know, it was overseeing the town. The helicopter was not very low, but low enough for example to hear its noise and it was illuminating with big headlights.

English soldiers were here. They were all somehow small, young... when we used to meet them, we always greeted them in our English, "How are you?" Whatever we had with us we shared it with them. At one point, happy that I had returned home again, sitting and having a beer with my husband, I saw the helicopter illuminating with the big headlights. And happy as I was, I turned towards the helicopter and {kisses fingers on her hand as sign of greeting} I sent him a kiss. And he blinked the light from above (smiles). It means... my husband said, "How come he saw you up there (smiles)." I mean to say, they were very good times.

I remember Kurrizi when I went out the following day, all the shops had been broken, there was nothing left in them. You found blood, clothes, you found different bandages, it was a living horror. But interestingly, within a week it was cleared up, sorted out, windows were fixed. Everything started coming to its place, families, aid, we started going out to get aid. And somehow, as if we were getting back to normal life, employment started. Five years, so from the year '99 to the year 2005 it was a period when we really hoped a lot. When everything was going well. Young people were all employed, if you only knew English a little, you had a chance of employment, age or anything else did not matter. My son got employed as a journalist with an international media, it was Media Action International. My husband returned to Kosova B, he started working there. Driton began... he was senior student in high school, his last year in high school. I was at home, trying more or less to get back to normality. And in the year...

## Dreams

*[Part of the interview cut out from the video: the interviewer asks the speaker to talk about her dreams in life and whether she achieved to fulfill them.]*

**Ola Sylja:** It may not be a coincidence that I remember things... memories from my early childhood and youth. Maybe, I recall them not by chance, because they have influenced what I have become now. My father's death has maybe caused me to be very strong, to face every challenge in life and to continue the path that he left. From the stories I have heard from others about my father, the ones that I have not known, but I have heard from others – they have encouraged me to do humanitarian work and I have always dreamt of making a great [television] show, in which I would go to my father's grave and say, "Father, you died young, but I have continued your work."

The part during which my brother always stopped me, didn't allow me to do things as I wanted, when I was young, maybe it was a motivation for me to always want and fight for equal rights for women. Hence, I always struggled for love. Maybe, when I was little, I fought for my father's love, then I fought for my brother's love, then I fought for my husband's love, now I fight for my sons' love. When I say fight, don't take it – not in the sense that I did everything, but simply I, as Ola, as a girl, as a woman, as a mother, have shown that I am very strong and powerful and can achieve what I want to achieve.

My work in Krusha may have been the work that I always dreamt of. I had a great desire to help people, I have a feeling that I want, to persuade people that through work you can achieve everything. Often when we sit with friends and we talk a lot, a lot, I don't like it when they say, "If I could turn back time ten years, five years I would do this, or if I was younger I would do this, or that." I would not turn back one second of my life, because everything I did in my life, I did it before... first of all I liked it, I did it with all my love. Everything difficult that came to my life, from another person or whomever, for me it was something that I had to turn into positivity and move forward.

I mean, there are some things in life that person, I think they are the way one takes them, because I would go back to an event when I was little and my mother was telling, there is on our side some kind of *meqave*, we call it a wind, they call it *meqava* in Istog. That wind blows once in two or three years and blows off to the ground all the roofs and when *meqava* was all over, mum said, "You always disappeared somewhere, vanished, we couldn't find you where you were." And mum said, "We'd search for you all over the place, and we'd find you among the flowers. We had many beautiful flowers in front of the house. And you would go among the flowers and you'd be untwining them {shows with hands}. 'What are you doing here Ola?' You'd say 'I'm untwining them because they're hurt.'" And I always wanted to be where there is a crisis, I thought that I had so much positive energy, I mean, that with my power and love I could untwine those things, that I could sort things out where and when needed.

Of course there are no people without dreams and there are people... but interestingly I cannot say that I had a life dream to achieve something, I simply had a wish and every wish I had in life has been fulfilled. I wanted to help people, the chance was given to me and I have helped them. I wanted to be a good wife, and I achieved it. I wanted to be a good mother and I have achieved it, because I have two sons today who are successful, have their careers, their lives. But what pleases me the most is my work with the women of Krusha, I mean as a non-governmental organization I have achieved my goal and my mission.

Next year I will turn sixty and I think it would be good if my work would be continued by one of the girls from Krusha, who are skilled and certainly capable to continue my activity. Most likely new

challenges and other issues will come up, which they will have to face, not the ones that I have overcome. Undoubtedly, now there will be new opportunities for projects that need to take place. And I think that I should slowly withdraw and again maybe withdraw completely, I will probably continue to work in this engagement of mine on women's equal rights and awareness raising in my own way as circumstances allow me, or as it is required from me. But, I've also started writing a book in which I plan to include all my work and life, not as Ola, but as a simple woman who has been thrown to the waves of life, and who has been able to get out and swim to the shore. The goal of the book is that simply through presenting my life, my mother's, my grandmother's, my aunts', my sisters' lives – to present the life of Kosovar women over the last one hundred years, it will mostly intertwine culture, the development of culture and cuisine. I am writing that book, I am not in a rush. I believe I will complete it by the time I get old, or by the time I die and I may leave it for my sons to publish. You know it will be the last page, the last page of my life.