

INTERVIEW WITH VJOSA DOBRUNA

Pristina | Date: July 3 and 11, 2013

Duration: 267 minutes

Present:

1. Vjosa Dobruna (Speaker)
2. Mimoza Paçuku (Interviewer)
3. Donjetë Berisha (Camera)
4. Jung Chao (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

Mimoza Paçuku: Can you tell us about your childhood?

Vjosa Dobruna: I think that my childhood was happy, like any other childhood. The little I can remember, I believe I can remember a lot. I spent my childhood in Gjakova, where I was born, and it was the happiest [time] because I grew up with both my parents who were very busy working, my grandfather, four of my uncles and my aunt, so it was a very happy childhood and I always felt much loved and pampered. Then my sisters were born, and my life became even better. Three sisters were born after me, we were four children. Then in the end my youngest sister was born when I was in high school, that's why I see her more as my child than as my sister. It was a happy childhood, I was the first child in a family where generation after generation - they say, I don't know whether it is a myth - in eleven generations there were one or two girls. I know that in the last three generations there was only one girl and in my generation I was the first girl born in the Dobruna family. So in a way I was privileged, because I demanded a lot of love from the time I was born. Four of my uncles, my aunt, my grandfather, my grandfather's wife, she wasn't my grandmother but she was my grandfather's wife, all of them were around me, also because both my parents worked, at that time even my mother worked.

At that time there were two working shifts, my mother told us she had to teach first and second grade in the morning, third and fourth grade in the afternoon. Therefore, most of the time she was not there, and my father neither, therefore I grew up with my grandfather. Even when my sisters were born I would still stay with my grandfather, and I think that my grandfather and my uncles had more impact on me than my parents. So this is how I spent my childhood until I was six years old, six and a half...when I went...

What I can remember from my childhood at that time, which also describes Kosovo a lot, is...when my grandfather, it was sometime around April '69 and...he had always a picture in the room...it was a man, it was a big picture and I didn't know who was in that picture. And everyone said, "This is your uncle, this is your uncle." I looked at him, "Is this my uncle, my uncle?" He [grandfather] said, "You were very little, when he went to jail...but when you were born he named you Vjosa." Ok. One day my grandfather came and said, "Tomorrow we will go somewhere, and we will hop on, we will hop on a horse carriage. We will go from Gjakova to Peja with the carriage. In Peja we will take a train to Pristina, and we will sleep one night in Pristina and the next day we will head to Niš."¹ I said, "What is

¹ The largest city in Southern Serbia, where one of three major prisons is located. The others are in Požarevac and Sremska Mitrovica.

there in Niš?” “You will see this man, your uncle!”

Then we went to Pristina, we took a bus, and we went first, first, before we entered Niš, there is a place called Deligrad,² and on the right side there was, there was a place like a bus station, it was covered. On the other side there was, there was a building with high walls and we entered, we entered inside escorted by police, they searched us and we entered inside where I saw him...stop! {asks to stop the filming because overcome by emotion}.

He was there, we entered, they searched us and sent us inside there, and there was a man behind bars. My grandfather had prepared a cream, he always prepared it from geese fat and I always asked, “Why?” He said, “They work in the prison foundry, and his hands get bruised.” I could touch his hands through the bars and this was the first time I saw him. From that day I always remember the conversation with my grandfather, that same day I saw him, and then we returned with...When we returned, there were all Albanians on the bus, because all the people who went for visits to the prison were Albanians, the whole bus. The driver was the only one speaking Serbian. And I remember asking my grandfather the whole time, “Why is he in prison?” He said, “He worked against the state.” I asked, “What did he do? He stole? He kill someone?” He said, “No, no. He was a math teacher and he wanted the children to speak Albanian in school and he taught Albanian. Together with some friends he made the request.” “But why was it forbidden to speak Albanian? We speak Albanian!” “Yes, we speak Albanian at home, but in school they were not allowed to.”

This was the first time I went to a prison, the one in Niš. Afterwards I continued to go time after time, starting from that year, from the ‘60s. The last time that I went to see my uncles in prison, because they were in prison one after another, was on 16 December 1996. The last time I went was when my third uncle, Sokol, Sokol Dobruna, was released from prison. So, starting from Hydajet, Skender, Sokol and Muslim, I visited the prisons every third Saturday, starting from the ‘60s until 16 December 1996, approximately 30 years. But I didn’t visit only my uncles. Sometime later, when I grew up, I visited also... I mean, I accompanied or drove family members of other political prisoners. I used to go and from those years I have many anecdotes, many things.

Once, once in the ‘80s, we went, we went to Leskovac,³ and the prison was on Czar Dušan street, No. 1. And all the prisoners were... they refused to speak Serbian with family members, because when we went to visit them in prison we were supposed to speak Serbian, not Albanian. They had put cassette players on both sides of the bars so that we would speak Albanian and they had... they did not want, they refused to speak Serbian. And I was with...I was near Karaqeva⁴ to pick up an old man whose son was in prison, the father of someone named Emin Krasniqi. He had broken his leg. I would always go from Pristina to pick up this old man from his house, and take him to the prison. And when we went there, they didn’t allow us to enter because they asked them [the inmates], “Do you agree to speak Serbian?” They said no. They asked us, “Do you agree to speak Serbian?” We said “No!” And when we

² Small village in the municipality of Aleksinac.

³ City in Southern Serbia.

⁴ Village in the municipality of Kamenica.

got out we had some yogurt and fresh onions, since it was May, we had bought them, when we got out I said, “*Bac*⁵ Hazir, I am very mad.” He said, “Well, what can you do?” I asked him, “Can we throw these yogurts at the prison window?” He said, “Here you go, throw the fresh onions as well.” He gave them to me, we had brought two yogurts for each of the prisoners, both yogurts in our hands, and the old man, we had parked the car outside the prison entrance, he gave me two yogurts and two batches of fresh onions and I threw them with all my anger at the window, the fresh onions and the yogurts. I was relieved. I got in the car and we continued driving to get back and return *bac* Hazir to the vicinity of Karaqeva. And the old man was very nice to me, any time I went to pick up something, I said, “What do we do now?” “We must release our anger, Vjosa, we will do something else.” Therefore...I have many, many, many stories, anecdotes from those prison years, thirty years of visiting prisons.

I went once when I had become a doctor. They beat them up a lot, before and after being investigated. They beat them up even later, all the prisoners. So I decided this, because I did not know what to do: I started to collect sedatives and put them in sugar. I would grind them and mix them with sugar. And each prisoner had the right to have four kilograms of goods per month, so I put one kilogram of sugar and I put enough sedatives, I grinded them or I took capsules and put them in sugar. With it, they would receive underwear, one hundred packets of cigarette and a bit of food that would last, *gurabija* [traditional cookie], smoked meat and other things and a kilogram of sugar. I mixed the sugar with sedatives so they would share it with each other every time they called them to the... “special rooms” where... they tortured them. They ate one spoon, two spoons of sugar.

Once they [the guards] returned the food to us since they were all on strike, and we returned to Pristina. When we returned to Pristina, we were together with the wife of another political prisoner and we prepared a cake that did not need to be baked and without noticing...we used that sugar to make the filling for the cake. We prepared everything, I put it in the fridge. We had some guests, I served the cake by cutting it in small pieces and gave it to them. Everyone started, started to get up, we did not know what was happening. Later, they said, “Vjosa, we are all sleepy, what is this, what is happening? You gave us something.” “What do you mean, I gave you something?!” “You gave us something!” I said to Teuta, “Teuta!” “What?” “Where is the sugar from the package that we brought back from Niš?” She said, “It is there!” “But where there?” Because we had to put the goods in cardboard boxes. She said she took it from the cardboard box! I said, “*Kuku*,⁶ I used that sugar” ...everyone was feeling sleepy.

I did different things. For example, they did not allow them to read Albanian newspapers. At that time *Zëri* was being published, the weekly *Zëri*, so I separated one hundred packets of cigarettes and wrapped each of them in one page of *Zëri*. So, they received three weeks of published *Zëri*, now, two weeks... three weeks exactly, because we went once a month. It was exactly three editions of *Zëri*, one hundred packets and they went to Niš, to Deligrad. Then, the guards would unwrap the newspaper, remove everything, give the packets of tobacco to the prisoners and throw out all the newspapers. One of the Albanian prisoners would go and collect the pages, rearrange them into a newspaper, and

⁵ *Bac*, literally uncle, is an endearing and respectful Albanian term for an older person.

⁶ Colloquial, expresses disbelief, distress, or wonder, depending on the context.

they would disseminate it among the political prisoners, everyone read the newspaper. I have many, many stories, going once a month for thirty years to visit them in prison. I have, I have...That was the first time I went. After that, the [visits] happened continuously. I saw it not only as part of my childhood, but also as part of growing up and also as part of my political education, because I was like a messenger. I would take information from one group to another in different prisons, even though they would not let me in, I got in there only with a special permission to visit my uncle, and the others through their family members whom I drove, because usually I would fill up the car with five people. We would be two, three different families in the car, because we made room [for them] to visit the prisoners.

Practically I visited prisons continuously all my life and that in a way shaped my political opinion...the human rights issue, the rights of Albanians in former Yugoslavia. After some years...when I returned from the United States after I finished high school, I learned about the existence of organizations that report on human rights and I learned what advocacy for human rights is, especially citizens' rights. Then I started to collect data and testimonies and to communicate with different organizations such as *Amnesty International*, and later *Human Right Watch*, the International Red Cross in Geneva. And I reported during the years ...the '80s, and the '90s and after that, the population of Kosovo in general and the educated strata started to understand the importance of advocacy for the rights of Albanians in Yugoslavia and [the importance] of communication to the outside world about it. But in the '70s and '80s really almost nobody in Kosovo knew about the existence of organizations we could report to. I reported what was happening to rights in Kosovo...not only in Kosovo but in the entire Yugoslavia.

My grandfather from my father's side practically did not work during all his life, he was the son of a rich family, so he did not work. My father tells me that for some periods, for some periods they moved to Mitrovica and he worked there but after a short time they returned [to Gjakova]. My grandmother was a young woman, she got married at the age of 15 and she had my father. She gave birth to my father when she was 16 and she was a very rich woman, so neither of them worked at that time, they lived off the wealth they had until the Second World War. During the Second World War my grandfather stayed at home and my grandmother went to war. She was a fighter in the Second World War, in the national-liberation war, and there are a lot of anecdotes about it. She was a very pretty woman and she was very strong, very much. And they say that after the war they celebrated...Shefkije, and until recently a street in Gjakova was named after her, Shefkije Dobruna. And they asked her, after the war they wanted to give her a post in Gjakova. "No, I do not want to, I do not want to cooperate with you!" "How come?! You fought together with us!" "Yes, but I am antifascist, I am not communist. And you communists have taken over. I will not support you." So she was very strong. They say, they say that even when her mother died, she prepared her mother and left her in one room, since it was her sister's wedding. She did not tell anyone. She left, she got ready, she put on a good dress for the wedding and she went to the wedding. She locked her dead mother in a room. They say, there were many, many, many, many stories about how strong she was. She was very strong and she was very beautiful and very proud, very proud.

So after the Second World War, when they nationalized everything her family had, everything, even

the land and all things, they [the family] had nothing left. They didn't even have anything to eat. They say that she filled a basket, a basket, where they usually left the bread, and she covered it with a white cloth, so if their cousins came, it would look full, even if you touched it, it would feel full, so nobody would notice it was empty. Because after the war, after the Second World War, Kosovo was under martial law ... repression. The majority of Albanians, even those who participated in the national liberation war, but who were not members of the Communist Party, were very discriminated. So different families, even though they were members of the National Liberation Movement, were tortured and persecuted as if they were against the national liberation war. Our family was one of those, even though [they were members of the National Liberation Movement]: my grandmother and my father and my uncle, who died in the last day of the war and the elementary school in Junik and the high school until this war had his name, but because he was not a member of the Communist Party, there was a repression that was exercised especially against Albanians in former Yugoslavia, especially in Kosovo, because Kosovo was seen as the center of a stronger national identity movement, and because of the higher concentration of the [Albanian] population. Therefore, some families that were identified as such have lived under [repression], practically all my childhood and youth have been like that, I mean, I have experienced it as such, because I always experienced police surveillance, when they would come to our house and they would wake us up... and I remember as a child when they came near the bed. We were four sisters and we had two rooms but in the two rooms we had beds... not bunk beds, but beds next to each other. And I remember when the police came, they crushed the beds, they pulled out the all the planks and once my aunt was there and there was... it was called *qumlek*, it was a part of the house, it was a sort of fireplace for heating. They searched even the papers with which we used to light up the fire of the stove, which was made of ceramic tiles, so they searched even that and my aunt got irritated. We were little, we were very scared of the police, she took a big clock and said, "Look, you might find something in here also, some propaganda material."

For me it was, in a way, there are some ... later on, as I grew up it became harder. Once I saw it as part of normal life, for the police to come at three or four in the morning, and wake us up because our uncles were in prison. I was not in my uncle's house. Or in the year '86 for example all the Dobruna children were expelled from university, all of them. Gurakuq was in the first year of his studies in architecture, Elbasan was in the second year, Shpend in the third, Ilirjana had started to study medicine, Valbona was studying civil engineering, and they were all expelled. We are talking about the year of '86, 1986. I was the first one to sue the state, the University of Kosovo at that time, for denying me the right to education.

Nine of these children who were expelled had their fathers imprisoned, [they had] their uncles. But they were all expelled from school, from university. They were not in their first year of studies, they were more advanced. The professors were all Albanians, the university was not closed yet. But they were scared and the system was like that. Now I get a little sick when I see the same university professors who sell patriotism, some of them are even in parliament. When they went out.....I went and talked to them, "Why did you expel the kids? Why did you expel the kids from school? But why did you expel Shpend, Valbona and Ilirjana when their mother is not Albanian but Croat! Why did you expel them?" I am telling you, I grew up with these things, so later on I gathered information about

everyone, and I sued the University for expelling [my cousins]. And when I went to court, when I saw those judges, when I saw and talked to them in a normal manner they smiled, "Eh, Vjosa".

1986 was the end ... when in the beginning of October I filed a lawsuit for expelling the children, all my uncle's children, they emigrated, they went to different parts of the world to get an education. And the problem was not only their expulsion, at that time every municipality sent a list of the enemies' children, they would send it to the university, and the university expelled them. I am talking about 1986 and not about '56. And the deputy rector of the university back then was Albanian, because the rector was a Serb. And he told me, "But Vjosa, this is the system. They are the children of irredentists, of nationalist families." "Have the children done something?" "No." "But why then?" "This is the list that we received from Gjakova, we need to expel these children." "But you are expelling people from the third year, the fourth year, before they graduate!?" This is how it happened, these were the times. And I am saying again, with all these things, sometimes I think I have lived more than one life. This was part of the lives of Albanians in Yugoslavia. Of course, they did not attack all families. Some families were demanding their rights louder and resisting the system - the system was like that - and some less, but we, as the Dobruna family, we suffered, we suffered a lot.

I do not have [many memories] about my mother's family, I have very few memories because my mother was an only child. They were born, I think...both of them died young, so my mother was raised by her grandmother and her aunts and uncles. And what was good and uncommon at that time for an orphan, my mother was educated. It was not common at that time to send a woman to school, but they sent her since her uncle also went to school. But in some way they were politically discriminated because during the Italian occupation my mother's uncle, Qamil Benxhija, worked for the Ministry of Education. He graduated in philosophy in Padua and medicine at the Sorbonne. So there weren't many people who went to school. When Italians occupied Albania, and then when they came to Kosovo, those students who studied in Italy worked for them, and my uncle Qamil was a student in Padua.

Then, he made it possible for my mother to go to school. Together with his mother, he raised my mother so he sent her to school ... So my mother graduated on time and she was one of the first Albanian teachers in Kosovo, she started working as a teacher in Rahovec since she was 16 and a half years old, 17 years old, I have her picture as well. After that, in Gjilan, together with her uncle Qamil Benxhija, they founded the High School of Gjilan, so I have good memories.

I feel proud about both sides of my family, my mother's side and my father's side. My mother worked as a teacher, my father studied as a sculptor until 1954. It was 1954 when they imprisoned his brother for the first time and they expelled him from the University of Belgrade. It was before graduation that he returned to Gjakova. Later, when he had three children, when Pranvera, Aida and I were born, my father went again to Belgrade to study to become a social worker. With three children at that time, my mother took care of us, while our father was studying. We traveled very often. We would go from Gjakova, they were excellent trips, we would take buses, trains bla bla to go to Belgrade to see our father every two- three months. So, we had good memories, they used to buy toys at that time, all things for children, to compensate for the absence of our parents. When we went to Belgrade to [visit]

our father, we would find many toys waiting for us, many clothes, many things. I was compensated in another way as well, because they would send me to communicate with the political prisoners, to visit my uncles in prisons.

I was also compensated by my grandfather, because he would feel guilty, since I started to go [to prisons] very young so he would always make everything possible for me. When I started, I was in my puberty and I started to grow. When we returned from Niš or Požarevac, from the prisons in Serbia, he would say, "You have behaved very well this month, what do you want this month?" I said, "I want Italian jeans." "All right, you will buy Italian jeans." Or he would say, "Next month..." He always tried to compensate me since they thought they were ruining my childhood. But not only my grandfather, my mother and father had a soft spot for me, because at that time even the one uncle who was out of prison, if they visited him, they would lose their job, so nobody could visit them in prison, only my grandfather who was old, or I, since I was a child. All others... for example one of them was in prison for ten years, the other brother did not see him for ten years. The other one was [in prison] 14 years, and they did not see each other for 14 years. I was the only one who visited them with my grandfather. And they always tried to somehow... do something for me, to make me feel like a child, and not to feel so mature. And... they were scared of the pain, until I practically started to understand. Even in school, children would tease me...

Ok, I remember a beautiful moment of my childhood. I told you earlier that I was the first girl in the family and there were not many boys, so I enjoyed a privileged status with everyone, especially my grandfather. My grandfather, his house was an old house and the floor, which was like a basement, was made of half stones and then it was stones, then there were some stairs made of stones, then there was the floor, and the courtyard was, I believe, it was very rare to find such [courtyard]. There were about fifty, one hundred kinds of roses and they were all around the courtyard, which was three hundred meters long and it had roses. At the house there was a garden with smaller flowers and above there was a pergola and a plum tree. When I started to go to school, my grandfather knew that I would go to his place after school, and not to my parents', to my house. I went to my grandfather's, he made like a desk for me under the plum tree, and the plum tree was near the pergola.

My grandfather would sit there at the table and drink. My grandfather drank a lot of alcohol. He lived his life, Teki Dervishi⁷ wrote a book, Teki Dervishi the writer, and said, "I dedicate this to the first bohemian that I have met in my life, Qazim Dobruna." He was a bohemian, he drank, he wanted to have many friends, he read a lot, he was *Bektashi*,⁸ and I would always tease him, "Grandpa, you are *Bektashi* not because you believe in any religion, but because you are in the reading club." The *Bektashi* read a lot and they also drink a lot. So my grandfather's house was a sort of *Bektashi* club and my father would always come there to check whether I was doing my homework, [at the desk] my grandfather had made near the plum tree, it was called plum *bardhake*. It would grow big plums and the trunk was thick. He made a desk for me, and my grandfather would drink down there with his

⁷ Teki Dervishi (1943-2011) born in Gjakova, was a writer, a publicist and a playwright. He was the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Bota Sot*.

⁸ Islamic Sufi order founded in the thirteenth century, mainly found in Anatolia and the Balkans. More diffused in Southern Albania, it has a presence in Kosovo as well, in particular in Gjakova.

friends with *meze*⁹ on the table near the vine.

I was there and he would say, “Do you have any questions related to your homework?” I would say, “No, no there is no need, when I have a question I will ask.” And I would do my homework there, during the summer of course, I did my homework. During wintertime I was again at my grandfather’s place, as I remember I had a corner, and at the time when my grandfather was sick, he was most of the time in his bed. At the end of the living room, the big room, there were many built-in old cabinets, and you would not distinguish them from the the bathroom’s door, in Gjakova it was called cellar, built on the same wall at the end of the room, because all doors were beautiful doors and handmade like the ceiling of the house. I asked them to make me a desk in the room, because my grandfather did not want me to sit on the sofa and do my homework there. They made me a desk from the door, which was part of the cellar and you could see it from the outside. They hand-made me a table, like a desk, from the door of the cellar, which was carved and they had to put a cardboard on top of it, so I could do my homework. They made me a desk with a *shkom*.¹⁰ And when my grandfather’s wife, my father’s stepmother [saw that], she revolted because they did that. She said, “I am teaching the girl how to have a sense of aesthetics, how to love beautiful things.” And... they made me the desk. I have these two memories connected with my grandfather.

Something else about my grandfather, when I was 12-13 years old, my mother and father were enough, I would not say rigorous, but they tried to establish some rules, so if you made a mistake, “Your younger sisters will be held accountable for that mistake. Therefore you have the responsibility not only for yourself, but also for your sisters because you are the oldest of all the children.” Then Shpend, Ilirjana, Valbona, Nderim, were born, the children of my other uncles were born. “But you are the oldest one, so if you make a mistake, everyone has made a mistake,” and she tried ... I had many limitations, many limitations. I did not have those limitations at my grandfather’s. When I went to his place, I had a lot of freedom. My grandfather ... once my grandfather said to me, “You know what? We will go out.” Near the *Çarshia e Vogël*¹¹ there were some café where my grandfather used to go, and he said, “We are going out, I will teach you something.” “What?” “I have seen it, on Sundays they do not give wine to children.” And he said, “I will take you now to a café to teach you how to drink wine, and another thing, how to smoke.”

He took me with him and we went to a café in the *Çarshia e Vogël*. My grandfather’s friends gathered, and my grandfather ordered a glass of red wine for me. The first time he ordered *shirë*,¹² and the second time also wine and cigarettes. He lit a cigarette for me. I was about 13 years old, 12-13 years old. I went home for the weekend, I did not go to my grandfather’s place and I told my parents. “Now my grandfather has taught me how to drink wine and now when we have lunch on Sundays, you will give me wine.” My father said, “Wine? Do you know how old are you?” I said, “Yes” He said, “Who taught you? I said, “Grandpa, we went to the café and he taught me how to drink wine.” I know that I felt there would be a strong argument between my father and my grandfather. My father took me by

⁹ Small plates of food.

¹⁰ Low wooden chair without arms.

¹¹ Literally, small market, old part of Gjakova.

¹² Non-alcoholic beverage that tastes like wine.

the hand and we went to my grandfather's house, and I heard the screaming. My grandfather said, "I am educating her, she needs to learn how to drink wine, I need to teach her how to smoke tobacco, to become independent, to argue with you because you are not always right. She also needs to be like her grandmother. And I will teach her all this."

Until my grandfather died, I was 16 years old when he died, there was always a conflict between my parents who wanted to educate me differently and they would make ... and my grandfather who read everything, well not everything, but everything! And what did he do? He received the pension of veteran from '41. They gave it to him later, after my grandmother died, they gave it to my grandfather. That pension was greater than my father's and mother's salaries together. My grandfather shared it with me. He said, "We split it in half." I usually spent it on food and clothes that we sent to prison, and not for anything else. But he wanted, he always wanted to give me the opportunity of being more independent and proud, of always having a lot. And when he died, when they opened the will that he left, everything that he had, he left it to us girls, [the girls] of others uncles, only to the girls. He always said, "Girls need to have a lot, we need to create a bigger security for the girls. We need to pamper the girls, and we should not allow them to work too much." Always the girls, he was always a big supporter and he would always say, "You walk with your head up high, you never look down."

When we got back from prison or something, I, a bit... I was teased by the children from school, especially the children of communist leaders, saying that she is a nationalist, her uncles are in prison, we should not hang out with her, or some other things. Or, for example, when there were festivities, when Tito came to Kosovo, or on 25 May, all children got out with a baton¹³ ... we the Dobruna children did not go because the school would now allow us to go. Not even to wait [for the relay race], not even to celebrate 25 May, because "You are nationalists." Later on I understood this and I was not upset about it, but as a child, in elementary school, I felt very bad when all the children went out to the street. I mean, we were the only ones who were not allowed to go out to the street, they sent us away.

And... after that, I started to make, I mean, my dose of trouble. When I was in eighth grade, they did not allow the [Albanian] flag. And... I organized the whole class, because with... they would put out all flags, so we would not put out the Albanian flag on the 28,¹⁴ on the 27 [November], they would raise the flags of Yugoslavia and Serbia. And... I can mention even the names, some of them are alive and some dead, my friends from the elementary school Mustafa Bakija in Gjakova. And we organized. I asked my grandfather where I could find Albanian flags. He told me about his friend in Prizren, a person from Gjakova living in Prizren who had returned to live again in Gjakova, who sewed flags secretly, Albanian flags. And I asked my grandfather where we could get money to pay. "Why do you need them?" I said, "I need one hundred flags." He said, "You go to him and tell him that I will pay. And I am not asking you why you need them." "Alright."

I went with a classmate. We shared a desk in class. We went and told him. And he asked, "When do you

¹³ The baton was carried in a relay of youth that crossed all of Yugoslavia on May 25, Communist leader Tito's birthday.

¹⁴ Albanian national Flag Day.

need them?” “We need to have them by the night of 27 November.” He said, “Alright.” We went on 27 November, after 11:00 o’clock at night, we went out, raised the flags on [telephone] poles, we were thirty people from our class, all of us. We climbed, took out the flags, and raised our Albanian flags. And the next day, on 28 November, the entire Gjakova had raised Albanian flags from the cemetery on the Prizren side to the *Çarshia e Vogël*. We stayed home because we knew that now the police would come. And they came... the police detained [the students] but nobody came to take me, since I was an exemplary student, very well behaved. They knew I went to visit my uncles in prison because they followed me, but I did not do anything extraordinary, extreme. My mother worked at the same school as a teacher. Therefore...

Okay, it was this way ... we changed all flags, and the next day the police went and detained the ones that were suspected. But I was a very, very good child and really, I was excellent in school, I never made trouble, I never missed class, I did my homework on time a lot, to the point that other children looked at me with a bit of suspicion, I was very, very good. Because I am telling you, they educated me in that way, that if I made a mistake [it would count as] all other children had made a mistake. So, if I weren’t a good student and behaved badly, I would shame my family. So I was really like that. So they did not come to my house. But then I understood that this was not the only reason. The professor advisor of the class, who was considered to be a spy, was forced [to become a spy]. He did not report me. He had said, they all went ... none of them said anything, none of them said anything about me. After some time, after we finished high school, with the same professor advisor of the class, we gathered in Deçan where one of my friends told to our professor advisor, he said, “Vjosa was the one who organized us, Vjosa was the one that brought us one hundred flags from one taylor from Gjakova who sewed those flags, Vjosa did it.” “I always suspected this,” he said, “but if they called Vjosa, not that they would detain her, but there would be more problems. Since you were not the ones who organized it, it would will be easy for you to be questioned.” So the ones who informed the police protected the children in a way.

And... in school... I see what kind of “trouble” I caused. But it was mostly the influence of prison even then when... a year earlier they had imprisoned many people for raising the flags. This was the last year that the Albanian flag was banned in Kosovo. Then the next year the flag was allowed, since constitutional changes were made in 1971, the amendments to the Constitution, then on ‘74 there was the new Constitution, so with the new changes to the Constitution in 1971 the use of the Albanian flag was allowed in Kosovo. This was the 28 November before the changes, the last one when I was in elementary school, when we changed the flags, and we threw the Yugoslav flags to the ground, and we put up the Albanian flags. This happened then... it was, it was fantastic because my father went out to the street on the 28 because he needed to go to work. But my father got out to the street even faster, because if you did not go out, if you were not seen in public, UDBA¹⁵ and the police always came and arrested [you] in case you were preparing a plot, especially my father, whose brothers were in prison.

They had this habit of staying in café, so people would see they were out in public. And he tells that

¹⁵ *Uprava državne bezbednosti* (State Security Administration), with the additional “a” for *armije*, Yugoslav army.

they went the next day to the street and he saw all the flags, and now the police with Qabrati - it was an organization for cleaning, climbed the poles. We were children, so it was easy for us to climb the poles. They were old people climbing the poles and my dad would ask, laughing, "Who did this?" He said, "I thought it might have been you but ... no, I do not believe it." When he came home he said, "This happened." "Aha...it happened, good." "Do you know anything about this issue?" "No!" "Very good." I remember he told me, "I always trust you." I said, "Me too." And this issue was closed. He did not doubt me. After a long, long time, when they found out who organized them, who brought the flags, who had them, because we all climbed on the poles, not just the boys, the girls as well, they understood.

Changing the flags had no consequences, but it became very famous. Even the newspaper *Rilindja*¹⁶ at that time, and the television, reported that in Gjakova the nationalists and irredentists and counter-revolutionaries and all the different names they called us, changed them: they threw the Yugoslav flags and replaced them with Albanian flags. The job was done. We made, we would make, these kind of troubles.

We read books secretly when we had them. We would take a book and read it. Usually I would get the books from my uncles, or someone from the group of political prisoners would give me a book. I would be the first to read the book and then give it to others, not the book *Dimri i madh* [*Dimri i vetmisë së madhe*, Winter of great loneliness] by Ismail Kadare, but *Gjarpërinjët e gjakut* [Snakes of Blood] by Adem Demaçi. And there were some, some books, some books about Čubrilović,¹⁷ and at that time they had ... We were in elementary school, the beginning of the high school when we read them. It was very dangerous to read them. But one would take them, usually I was the one who found them, then would give them to others, but it never happened that my friends betrayed me, that they said, "It is Vjosa." Even when they were caught with books they never said that Vjosa was the one that gave them the book. Never! They always threw the books away, ripped them, did something, not ... "I found it in the street," they did something. So they would get slapped because they were under the age of 17-18 and in the end they would let them go, but they never betrayed me. They always have... I have provided them with books, with all books, and with all the other actions that we needed to do at that time to show some resistance.

And for me this was a type of a safety valve from everything I experienced in daily life, daily because ... for example, nobody in my family worked, only my mom worked. Then, because my uncles were in prison, they would fire them from work, they also fired my dad and anyone who was outside [prison]. So the only safety valve that I had was to do such things and read, because often also my friends and I... I remember in '85, I was working as a doctor in the children's dispensary, when on 5 October, on 5 March they imprisoned four of my uncles, do you understand? I heard it on television, since I was at

¹⁶ *Rilindja*, the first newspaper in Albanian language in Yugoslavia, initially printed in 1945 as a weekly newspaper.

¹⁷ Vaso Čubrilović (1897-1990) was a Bosnian Serb political activist and academic, a member of the conspiratorial group Young Bosnia, which executed the assassination of the Hapsburg Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914. He advocated the ethnic cleansing of minorities from Serbia, notably the Albanians of Kosovo, in a memorandum published in 1937 and entitled *Iseljavanje Arnauta* (The Expulsion of the Albanians).

work, I worked as a doctor and, on 5 March in the evening, actually on 6 March we understood from the television, the news, what happened.

It happened on 8 March, at that time they celebrated 8 March,¹⁸ the entire children's dispensary gathered to celebrate 8 March, they did not invite me, half of the people who worked there are now parliamentarians, patriots. At that time they would invite, they gathered to celebrate 8 March, but they did not call me, because this was ... "We do not dare to call her because she might bring trouble, they might arrest us or questions us as well. We do not dare to invite her even to solemn events." They did not invite me anywhere because I had my uncles in prison. Even in '85, '86, they left one guard who was standing in front of my office, the entire shift, from 7:00 until 2:00, he was supposed to stay there. He scared my patients, he scared them. But nobody from the dispensary would come and talk to me. I am talking about '85, '86, before going to specialization, working as a doctor in the children's dispensary, nobody dared to speak to me because my uncles were in prison, all of them. For months we did not know where they were, so together with my four sisters we would get in the car, we would dress beautifully, with Italian shoes, Jugoexport dresses since they were the best, or Italian jeans and we would dress fashionably and we would go to Gjakova's prison. "Do you have our uncles here?" No. In Prizren's prison no, Gjilan's prison no, Pristina's prison no, Podujevo's prison no, Mitrovica's no.

For three months we did not know whether they were alive or not. They did not tell us where they were in any of those prisons. They had been the whole time in Prizren's prison. They never told us, for three months. But we made it a routine for three months, five of us, we waited to go on Friday afternoon. They assigned me to work on purpose on Friday afternoon. Then I would go Friday before noon to two police stations, I came by car with my sisters and returned to work by 1 o'clock, since the working shift started at 1. They did this to me on purpose because they learned that I took my sisters to prisons to visit [our uncles]. My father was scared that ... they would rape us when we went to the police station, and he always said, "It is better the five of you go, men cannot go." My dad was the only one left of all the males [in the family] because all others were imprisoned, when he went, as the children of the others were all little, they could not go and look for them in prisons, in police stations.

Just the five of us. My younger sister Donika was very little, and... but we, especially the three of us, Pranvera, Aida and I, the oldest ones, the three of us in the car, the five of us would go to the police station, to a police station. And in Peja's police station we became so familiar to them, that we could go to Peja court to get permission to visit the prisoners. So, we went to get permissions without knowing where they were, we just needed to get the permission. We went... first to Peja and we went to the police stations for three months. After three months we found out that they were in Prizren. Then it was easier because there were specific days to visit them. And, yes, they started to send them to different places. Then they were sentenced. The youngest one was sentenced 14 years in prison, the others ones less. This was not the first time. And yes... at work it was very hard, at home it was very hard, because nobody knocked on our door. Never!

Nobody dared. Only a friend of mine, a girlfriend, doctor Klara. She was the only one who dared to

¹⁸ 8th of March is celebrated as International Women's Day.

come to our house. Because no one dared. They expelled all of us children from university. They fired everyone from work, but not me as a doctor, and Pranvera. All the others were fired from work.

All my uncles were in jail and I said, "Thank God our grandfather and grandmother are dead." Because my grandmother would say, "I don't have anything to fight for!" At that time Pranvera and I were practically providing for all of my uncles' families. One had four children, another three children, one had four children, only the youngest was not married and we provided for the entire family, and we did it well.

To show them that we were unbreakable, we took all the children and spent two weeks of vacation in Greece, because they kept them [the uncles] in prison for a few days, or we went to buy a new wardrobe, we bought new footballs, and stuff like this that kids want, or new bikes, just something to show them that we were resisting, and we selected people who could see them [in prison], because a lot of informants came just to provoke us, or they left something at the house and after two hours the police would come pretending to check the house, and they would find some kind of propaganda material.

Or I remember once we painted our grandfather's house and there was some paint left and we kept it, just in case the walls got dirty so we could repaint them. When the police came, one said, "You made Molotov cocktails, you kept Molotov." "What Molotov?" He said, "You kept Molotov under the stairs". "Ok" I said, "Take it, it is paint." He said, "No, it is Molotov..." "Take the Molotov." He said, "Come to the police station." I said "Okay, I will come to the police station." I said, "But first, this is not my house"... They took the Molotov. I laugh at that person a lot, believe me, a lot, because now I see him as a member of the Serbian State Security, when they questioned me, and not only me, but also Gurakuq, Saranda and Leka who were nine, ten, and eleven years old. And they kept interrogating us until 11:00 p.m. about a bottle of paint that was left after painting the house. "There, you made Molotov cocktails." Come on.

They took all of us kids and sent us to the police station and they kept us there for hours and they were Albanians, not Serbs... and all of them are still alive. Thank God they are still alive, and thank God that they are great patriots... now I can't even look at them in the eyes when I see them in different events or when they write patriotic books, those who questioned me in the police station for so long, who questioned me every time I visited my uncles in prison when they were on strike, and took me to the police station when I returned from the visits and interrogated me for hours. My mom and dad stayed in front of the police station for hours, always afraid that something might happen to me. And these members of the Serbian State Security were always Albanians and what my uncle said to me was, about the families of the other I met before Deligrad prison, "What did they say?" "What did you say?"

Those weren't easy times, it seems now, and even then it seemed hard, believe me! My family supported me, I was loved in my family, I didn't lack the warmth of my large family. Now I see that I was hurt but I kept it inside, I turned it off. Now sometimes when I see these people I remember them, and now I blame them more than then. Then it seemed more normal to me, he was part of the system,

he was doing his job, I should be careful because he was a member of the Serbian State Security, he was an informant, he was this, he was that, I didn't think a lot about that, I saw it as normal, and now when I see those people, it hurts more, I have some anger... I'm not revengeful, I don't want revenge but that fact that there wasn't some lustration in Kosovo disturbs me. It disturbs me that people give them nonexistent recognitions, and I know everything, I know those people, I know who was a spy for whom, who spied on political prisoners, I know who interrogated me. I recognize better the Albanians than the Serbian police who interrogated me more than eleven times during the apartheid¹⁹ and the war in Kosovo, the Serbian police. I don't remember those Serbs' faces, I don't remember their faces, only the consequences of when they broke my spine. But the Albanians who interrogated me especially in the '80s, when my uncles were imprisoned, I remember each one of them. Even though I am old now, I still feel something when I see them in the street or anywhere else and I recognize them immediately. It is unbelievable how well I recognize them, not the Serbs, because it was apartheid and we were in a big conflict, and I knew I was doing something against them, but those before the war who used to be UDBA, when the Albanians interrogated you. I can never get over that, I could never justify them. I justify the Serbs, but not the Albanians, who left me with the consequences [the broken spine from the beating] that I explain when I communicate with these people for different reasons, and I know I am a little harsh... I always try to make them understand that I know, that I have not forgotten, I know what you did even if you didn't do it to me, I know whom you did it to. I know cases when prisoners were raped, I know and when I see those people I just can't be polite to them, I can't do what society expects me to do, I say something to let them know, to not let them feel safe. I keep this to myself, but it shines like a light when I see them, and I just can't hold it in even though I try, I can't hold it in, because I know how much this population has been through, I know, I have lived it.

There were some people who knew nothing about education, there were only a few people who were surrounded by more educated people than I was, from both sides. I told you my mom's uncle studied at the Sorbonne and in Padua and the previous generations in my family were educated. It's about education, but they created a layer of society that enjoyed wellbeing for various reasons and was quite judgmental of others, especially those called nationalists or irredentists or had someone in prison. Then you were more discriminated, and I know when I finished medical school, I was not the best, but one of the bests in my generation. And they said to me, "Don't even try to compete for the position of assistant professor. All your uncles are imprisoned, what are you thinking?" My professors, who loved and respected me, said, "Don't apply, don't put us in a bad position." And I said, "What about the others?" "They are not involved in politics, you are from the Dobruna family, be a doctor." "But I want to get involved in education." "You can't get involved in education." It was normal, now we are forgetting how things were because now is a different time, we are forgetting how much some families have gone through, especially village families, they suffered more.

Our family in Gjakova, not only ours but also other families in Gjakova, we had a "special status" {makes air quotes}. All the children went through that, but I was the oldest, so I had more obligations. But trust me, all the children went to the police stations, all of them... even though they were only children. Leka was eight or nine years old when they first questioned him in the police station for a few

¹⁹ Apartheid refers to the parallel Kosovo Albanian society, living side by side the Serbian state, during the 1990s.

hours. All our children have been through that... children, it is different when they are older, all of them then went to the KLA [Kosovo Liberation Army]. Nine... all of them joined the KLA, it was a continuous family education, and all of them are unemployed now (laughs). Because none of them joined political parties, and here if you don't support any of the "leaders" {makes air quotes} you won't find a job. All of them are unemployed, all, all, all of them... (smiles).

It was a bit strange then, because I had to move to Pristina to go to high school, because my dad got fired in Gjakova too. All of them, including my father, came to Pristina to work, practically to let it [political repression] fade away. He started working in the school Ramiz Sadik. My mom couldn't find a job as a teacher here, but I came with my father to Pristina. And it was a good environment because my dad got a large apartment and he would gather there with a club of friends, all of them were dissident in some way and they stayed in the apartment. My dad's apartment had four rooms and three of them were bedrooms and Teki Dervishi, Shaqir Shaqiri and Jusuf Gërvalla²⁰ gathered there. Practically, the atmosphere in which I was brought up continued with them, but it was more literary. Even they in some way... I was, how old was I when I came to Pristina? I was fourteen years old, in high school (smiles). Somehow I started a different kind of "education" {makes air quotes}, not only the education I got in school, but I stayed up all night with them reading, or with them writing and explaining what they were writing. My father has the original manuscripts of everything Teki Dervishi wrote. During his last days in Kosovo, when he was banned from *Rilindja*, went to Skopje and came back, Jusuf hid in my father's apartment.

It was strange, but I was still a good student even in high school. It was strange, in the fourth year of high school there were only three students chosen to go to America for one year of high school. I was chosen. It was strange because people whose parents were not members of the communist party were not allowed to go, but they chose me. And I went to America, I finished high school there. I was a good student there too. In America the National Honours Society invites the best one hundred high schools and then they choose the best one hundred students and I was one of them that year. When I finished high school, they offered me to study architecture at UCLA, but according to the American law you were not allowed to stay there without your parent's permission. Back then you were not allowed to vote until you were twenty-one. I was not eighteen yet when I finished high school.

So, both my parents had to sign for me to stay in America. My dad went to the American Embassy in Belgrade and he signed, but not my mother. She said, "First let her come to Kosovo, and then we'll see." That time I was to stay in Pristina only during the summer, so I came back to Pristina. I went out one day, back then there used to be a hotel named Bozhur, and I met my friends there, because I had just come back from America and I wanted to know what my friends were going to study. I remember one of my friends coming to me and saying, "Congratulation, you have been accepted in medical school!" Back then, to get accepted in medical school you had to pass an admission exam, but all my grades were Fives²¹ from the beginning and even in America... so back then people like me, who had

²⁰ Jusuf Gervalla (1945- 1982) was a poet and also nationalist activist killed in Germany together with his brother and a third person. All these killings have been widely attributed to Yugoslav agents, though no investigation has come to a conclusive identification of the killers.

²¹ Grade A on an A-F scale (Five-0).

all Fives, were called *Vukovca* (laughs). You don't remember that, but we had the prize Vuk Karadžić²² for good students. So I had been accepted in medical school without the admission exam, and registered in medical school. When I got home I asked, "Can someone tell me how did I get accepted in medical school?" It was a family tradition, we all had to be at home at 3PM to have lunch together. And I came home and asked, I looked at my dad and said, "How is it possible that I got accepted into medical school?" He said, "Talk to you mother." I looked at my mother, she was keeping her head down, "I want one of my children to study medicine, and since you are the oldest, you have to study it." And she said, "I want you to study medicine." And secondly, "If you won't listen to me and won't study it, then your four sisters won't listen to me after that. It is your obligation since you are the oldest." "But mother, I don't love medicine, I am scared of blood." She said, "I'm sorry, this is my will, you are not eighteen yet. Forget about America." And as a good girl, and because of the obligation that I had towards my sisters, I conceded.

But so I could do something that I wanted to do, I also enrolled in the English department, not only medicine. So, I studied both English and medicine, I translated all the cartoons for Radio Television Pristina [RTP], and worked as a translator for Exim Kos at the same time. And I earned more money than my mother and father put together (smiles). In the beginning I translated only cartoons for RTP but later on I translated all the movies, because my professors at the university worked for RTP. And they got movies to translate, and they gave them to us... There were only a few students who knew English, so they gave me the movies to translate, and they got money, I got overtime. Because the movies were translated in their names, but I got paid too. During the time that I studied, I also worked all the time. I translated all the time, I translated faxes. While the Feronikel factory was being built, all the faxes from investors came from... equipments that were bought, pipes, came from Sweden to Exim Kos and they didn't know English then. I translated, wrote faxes, was in charge of the correspondence.

Through all my studies I worked. Practically, I worked since I was sixteen (smiles). Even when in high school, when I was in America, I worked at Burger King and then at Macy's. And when I came back, I immediately enrolled in the university. I worked for RTP, I worked for Exim Kos until I graduated. When I finished medical school, I got accepted to work in the children department of the hospital, and we were the first large group of Albanians to be accepted. All of them... most of them were Serbs and the first group of Albanians and another eleven people were accepted. I was one of them, and obviously all the bosses and directors were Serbs, only we, the employees, were Albanian. But at the same time I worked in Glogovc, I worked there for fun. Komoran, Glogovc, all villages, and it was an amazing experience.

Even if we didn't want war at all, we should have fought for Drenica. Drenica was... I was there when the "Tahir Meha's war"²³ happened. I was there when... I remember once there were the Serbian police forces, Yugoslav, no Serbian, sorry, they gathered from all Yugoslavia in July 1981, they

²² Vuk Karadžić (1787-1864) was a nineteenth century Serbian linguist and folklore scholar who was the major proponent of a Serbian national identity based on language.

²³ Having refused to go back to jail to complete his sentence, Tahir Meha was killed by the police together with his father during a siege of his home in 1982.

surrounded Bellaqevc. And a technician who worked with me said, “Vjosa, doctor, they surrounded Bellaqevc.” “What is in Bellaqevc?” He said, “There’s a typewriter.” Back then we used to write political promotional materials on that. When I was in Italy, I went to buy my wardrobe (smiles). And I went to work, it was hot but I went to work with some knee length boots and some shorts. I was 25 years and a doctor, the technician said, “What do we do?” “We go and get them out.” And I told the director that we are going to get people vaccinated, how would the police know what the vaccination calendar was. And I said, “I’ll ask the for jeep,” and back then there were those kinds of jeeps without doors. We wore white coats and we got into the jeep, and we went to Bellaqevc and we gathered them and said, “We are here to do the vaccination.” And the technicians who were with me, the nurses, found the typewriter, and took the material. We got the boys and put them in the car because we had to do blood tests, we couldn’t vaccinate them without blood tests. We kept them in the car because we needed to do the vaccination (smiles), to not get beaten by the police (laughs). We took them back to Glllogvc.

Then, it was easy to get them away from Glllogvc, but not to get them out from Ballaqevc and to get the boys who worked as typists to safety, but the technicians tried to hide the typewriter too. The police figured out that we did something, and they stopped us at the crossroad between Komoran and... they got all the doctors who were traveling from Pristina out of the car. And they beat one of our colleagues because he said, “Do you know who I am? My father is a member of the Regional Committee of the Communist Party.” They beat him so hard, in front of us, and we didn’t dare to get out. The car was like a house, there the bed {gestures with hands}, Liria and me, two women doctors, she was a dentist and I was a doctor. And we stood behind, but the problem was that someone told them that some doctors went there pretending to vaccinate and they hid or did something with the typewriter and took it away...These young guys from Bellaqevc, and those experiences helped me a lot.

Then during the war, I could go anywhere in Drenica because I knew the roads, the families, I knew from which and where to be more cautious. And the centers where we left our drugs and the other equipment during the war were Guri i Plakës, Shala, Sedllarë and Pjetërshticë, Vasilevë and Bugosh. The experience of ‘81 and ‘82, working in Drenica, helped me a lot because I knew the roads, I knew the people. Even though it was a few years later, I had some sort of knowledge of Drenica. During the war, the work of those years helped me a lot because I knew the roads and every alley in the villages of Kosovo, only a few people knew the roads that I did, I knew how to go where Ramush²⁴ went, Jabllanica through Shaptem, to go behind, or to enter Drenica, some roads, some back roads that we went through, we entered, that no one knew. That experience of ‘81 and ‘82 taught me the back roads so well.

Nothing... I worked already ten years as a doctor, in October 26 I went to Zagreb for my specialization, and usually the law was to go a year somewhere abroad, and I stayed three years and a half, until June

²⁴ Ramush Haradinaj (1968), leader of the KLA from the region of Dukagjin, founder of the political party AAK (*Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës*) and twice Prime Minister. In 2005 he was indicted at the ICTY for war crimes and crimes against humanity and acquitted of all charges. He was retried and again acquitted in 2010.

23rd of '89. And, where I finished graduate school, I only had to do the master thesis for the specialization in pediatrics. And that was a very good period because the women network begun to get activated, and a movement for women's rights was created. I immediately made women friends in Zagreb and we started to talk about women's rights as human rights in the radio station 101. And we created a network with some women groups in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia and Kosovo, which continued to work together during all wars, not only during the '80s, the '90s, but also after the war.

Macedonia and Montenegro weren't part of that network, there were no women activists who worked for women's rights. Kosovo was quite strong in this field. I was one of the first in the network and collaborated with groups of women and this was because of my life in Zagreb. We still collaborate with them on different issues that are important in the Mediterranean, in the Balkans and Europe... they used to be called ex-Yugoslavia, but now they are not, and we mostly collaborate on women's rights issues. During the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, we collaborated a lot, we tried to support and protect women's rights, and protect them against rape, especially in Bosnia and Kosovo, and we worked on the same protection and report of violations of human rights as before.

We had the first data on the years of apartheid in Kosovo, on political prisoners... we had testimonies that some of them were raped. So the work continued, practically we knew that all the Serbian security forces, not only the paramilitaries but also the police and the army used rape as a tool of war. In Bosnia it was more drastic, in Kosovo they got a little more educated, they used the experiences from Bosnia and when they applied them in Kosovo, they were more sophisticated. I am being cynical here, but they knew how to hide it better. And most of the women who got raped were also killed. In Bosnia there were so many cases where they let them live. In Kosovo they carried the dead and the killed in refrigerator trucks, and they exhumed bodies and carried them to Serbia and that's how they tried to hide the rapes. Because in Bosnia they did all these stuff more openly, in Kosovo they changed their strategies and they became {makes air quotes} "smarter" to hide it.

But the rapes of the Albanian women was a practice developed for years in police stations. When they were questioned during the "informative conversations," as they were called, or when they were sentenced, there was this practice which was denounced much later. Then, in the '90s for example, when I worked as an activist for the Council for Human Rights, we reported cases like these. But as for the general public, the aim was not to make a big deal of this... the men of the Council for the Protection of Freedom and Human Rights opposed that we, the women activists, publicized these cases. At the same time, the families of the raped girls and women too did not want to discuss the issue. This goes on even today, we have problems in identifying them, because we know who they are, and in getting them to publicly tell what happened to them.

After I finished medical school, I started working at the children's department of the hospital with a group of eleven people that were hired, and I also worked in Drenica and Glllogvc for some time, and then in Komoran. So I worked in Drenica and Pristina from '81 through '86. In October 1986 I went to Zagreb, I came back on the 23. That year constitutional violent shifts happened and of course there was resistance over these shifts, because we knew the consequences of that at every level of the Kosovar and Albanian society. So on August 15, 1990, I remember it was twenty past eight o'clock [in

the morning]... I don't remember everything that happened, but it was my mother's and father's anniversary. A few days earlier my sisters and I had organized a surprise party in the restaurant of one of our friends (smiles). We decorated it with flowers and stuff, all there was left was for me to buy a bouquet of flowers for the table. I was waiting to finish my shift at work and also for my father to finish his so we could go home because usually I drove my father, since we went the same way.

My father worked in the school Ramiz Sadiku and I worked in the hospital, we used to come back home together. We wanted to surprise them and not go home but straight to the restaurant, because it was their wedding anniversary, on August 15. But at twenty past eight o'clock, at least 15 policeman came and surrounded the hospital. I was on the first floor then, I led the department of children development and of neurological disorders of children from birth to the first year and I was checking a child, because work began at seven and it was twenty past eight, and a few weeks earlier all the Serbian doctors and nurses had quit. And when I came to work that day, I saw a Serbian nurse whose husband was a director of the police station near the hospital, she came to work that day.

And I was surprised, and I looked at her, "Did you tell the director? Because when you don't come to work for three days, you lose [your job]." She said, "This is only true for you Albanians, not for us, *za vas Šiptari*²⁵ [for you Albanians]"... I didn't say anything, I'll fix it later, I'll take care of this later, I went in because there were so many patients. And they brought me a patient, he was a former political prisoner from Gjilan who brought his nephew, to have him checked. And while I was checking him, the police came in and said, "Leave the kid, get out of here," and I said, "Why?" He said, in Serbian, "You have to quit." I said, "I didn't know that now the police can fire you from work." He said, "Get out." I said, "No, I won't get out, I'll stay here. I want to see an official paper saying that I'm fired and not a police [order]. You go out, you're frightening the kids." Arguing... This Serb [the nurse], Zorica, said, "What did I tell you, the Albanians who work here are like this." She was cursing, something. Samka, the other nurse who was there, standing by the door said, "She won't get out, it won't work." We began to argue, some harsh words were said but I still stayed there.

Some other Albanians doctors came. I said, "Take a photo of them." If you saw them, you would have thought that they had come to catch some terrorists, because they carried rifles. I said, "Let one of the doctors here take a picture if they push me out," but they were all scared, none of them took a picture. So I stayed there until two o'clock, until my shift ended, and in the meantime they brought the official paper. And it said that I got fired because I missed three days of work (laughs), but actually I had been at work. And the day after that, at seven... a normal day, I went and took my father from work and went to the restaurant as we had planned. We sat there, and we started celebrating. We gathered, my sisters, uncles, all of them were there and they said, "Is everything okay with you?" I said, "It's nothing, the police fired me."

Until then they had only fired people from RTP [Radio Television Prishtina], not doctors. But in the evening we heard that I wasn't the first one, even in the surgery department they had fired people, but

²⁵ The Serbian word for Albanian is *Albanci* or *Albanac*. In an attempt to distinguish between Albanians from Albania proper and those in Kosovo, they used *Šiptar*, stemming from the Albanian word for Albanians, *Shqiptar*, for Kosovo Albanians. The word is considered derogatory by Albanians.

down there I was the first one. The next day I got ready and went to work again. A policeman was at the door and he started... three or four policeman chased me out. Even the day after that day, I made it like a routine, now it was kinda fun to do that, every day at seven, I got dressed, I got ready, and I went to work. The police got in front of the door, they said, "We'll beat you," to the point that my colleagues, the ones who were still working, they didn't fire all of them, only me, said, "Don't come here to provoke them." When there were the unions' protests of September 3, that's when they got fired too. But from August 15 until September 3, I was the only one.

At first I didn't know why, I wrote some prescriptions for kids, that's where they registered the names of children and how their medical condition was, that's where they got their vaccine, and they went to the municipality to get registered. And the Serbian nurses got orders to write their names in Cyrillic, they distorted their names. So I protested that, and I asked that the names of the kids be written in their original way, I didn't mention the language or anything, just write them in the original way. The director called the police and the head of the department, who was Albanian, the director was a Serbian woman, and the head of the department was Albanian. The police came one day and mistreated him in front of the patients, before firing me. Because of her, in the end also the Albanian head of the department said, "She is from an anti-Yugoslav family, she is a nationalist," bla bla, so the doctor who was the head of the department was duplicitous. He wouldn't even look me in the eyes {she changes her intonation}, "If she makes one more mistake we'll fire her. This time we will just not give her the salary."

This happened in the end: they fired me, they fired me on 15 August, and then on 3 September they fired the others because of the protests, so I immediately started working as a volunteer for *Nëna Tereza*.²⁶ I talked with Don Lush and *bac* Jak [Mita] and I went to work there, but one day I worked as a pediatrician, and three days I worked with logistics. I collected equipment, I wrote applications for funds, I wrote some reports that I still have with me, I did everything. I got in touch with the Caritas of Vienna... with the Caritas of Firenze, with the whole world to bring... at the same time, one day I worked in the Council for Human Rights, one day as a pediatrician, and in *Nëna Tereza* I worked as everything.

Practically, from November 1990 until 1992, when I started the Center for the Protection of Women and Children, I worked as volunteer in all these places. Practically, I used to work from seven until dusk, because later we wouldn't dare to go out in the streets. In the Council for Human Rights often happened that I had to stay late, to write reports when something happened. After we received an information about a violation of human rights, we had to go and take the original testimony, because we had a lot of cases. But when they didn't come there [the office], for example when they were from a village, and when we saw that there was a pattern, that it was not an isolated case, but a campaign, a territory, then we would spread out and take the statement in person. Then, we had to refine the statements, enter them in the computer, and report them.

²⁶ Mother Theresa, the self-help organization that during the 1990s, at the height of Milošević's repression, supported the parallel society of Albanians, expelled from all state institutions and services.

Although during that time we really have been through everything, seen everything, what I remember...I was impressed not only by the violence of the Serbs, but also by the denial of women's rights by the rest of the population. For example, the reports we did for the Council for Human Rights, they never allowed us to write the name of the woman, but they wrote "somebody"...not the name but NN, somebody's wife, or NN, somebody's daughter. For years people who worked in the Council, especially we, women, fought with others to write the name [of a victim], she had an identity. We wanted to write their names... not Vjosa, the daughter of Musa Dobruna, but just Vjosa Dobruna, not someone else. There was a kind of resistance to name women in regard to anything, not only as victims of beating or of rapes, but for whatever violation of women's rights. In the reports, they always said that the women were collateral damage, and that the damage and the violation didn't really affect the women, but the men. So, it was a time that I found really difficult, I did the reports during the day I was assigned to work, I went and got the testimony and wrote the woman's name, but when I came [to the office] they erased that name. Not only I, all the women who were in the Council, who were volunteers in the Council, we all had the same problem, we all fought. So in this case I noticed that I was doing this job, I was a doctor it was an obligation of mine, I was a pediatrician, I should do it. But we weren't doing anything to increase women's awareness. We were doing a routine job, we took care of the children, we took care of the women and then let them go home, but we weren't doing anything about all the violence that was done to them.

For example, it happened to me to have children die in my arms and I've been a doctor for 31 years but it never happened to me that a child died and I did not cry. I never got used to it, never! Or to see a child in a lot of pain and not to cry, sometimes I need more help than them. I remember one time a woman came to me, her husband was in Germany, and they had deported her from Germany because she didn't have legal papers. She was married for many years, and she got pregnant after nine years. And when she got pregnant she got deported from Germany, and now she lived with her parents-in-law. She had a beautiful daughter, but she got sick. Her parents-in-law didn't allow her to leave the village because "the Serbian military might rape you." The violence against women was twice worse, because Serbian violence manifested itself as one more reason to limit freedom of movement for women, also because women kept the place together, they kept Kosovo together, because the husbands were abroad. So she brought her child at the edge of death, that she could die in my arms. I was terrified when she said why she had not brought her child to the hospital until then. I asked her, "Why didn't you bring her earlier?" She said, "My parents-in-law wouldn't allow me to get out." I was so terrified, I even cried more than the woman whose child died and I couldn't let go of the child.

There were so many cases like this, how women's freedom of movement was limited by their families, not only by the patriarch in the families, especially in rural families... but now, using the Serbian repression, they "cemented" women. And no one wanted to report that, no one wanted us to work on that issue, these were the reasons why I chose to open the Center, because we offered services, we offered medical care, we offered counseling, we offered help with *Nënë Tereza*, but we didn't offer some kind of support, we weren't going to villages to talk to those people, to tell them that these women were keeping this society still standing, this society alive... and even if they were not the ones doing this, they still had the right of free movement. You can't use Serbian repression to found and

cement the patriarchal system of the families.

Maybe it wasn't that hard to do, but it was hard to start, developing it wasn't so hard. It was hard to start because the political parties then were judgmental. "Who would deal with women's rights when we have repression and they're killing us every day..." And it was very hard, I remember some talks I had with Ibrahim Rugova. The president would say, "What are you doing? You are dividing the society. Instead of us being a common front against Serbia, you are talking about women's rights." I would say, "Women's rights aren't only being violated by Serbia, we will get Serbia out of here. But they are being violated also by our families and everyone else. Women's children are dying, and women are dying themselves.... Do you know how many women died through the years from hemorrhages?" It wasn't that they had nowhere to go, because there were a lot of clinics that could offer help, but they couldn't go out, especially in the villages. It was horrible. That's why I say Drenica and Llap were liberated twice or three times after this war. After the war they were given another freedom. Their family as well was liberated, and they gained some rights that were natural rights, but they could not experience them because of Kosovo's patriarchalism.

Nowhere women were as repressed and punished, and they were not to blame. In villages they called the women "slaves," "house slaves." And they were "slaves," so these things gave me the idea for the Center... It wasn't just a click {clicks her fingers}. All those experiences that I saw offered two alternatives: I could open a private clinic and make money, this was one of the alternatives, and the other one, the one closer to my nature, was opening a center where I could offer the same services I offer at Mother Theresa or by going to the field, but at the same time documenting, raising awareness, educating women about their rights, especially in rural areas. We knew that this war was going to end sometime. We knew that there was no way that Kosovo would not be liberated. Independence is something else. But to be liberated... I knew those women will never be liberated if someone didn't help them.

This was the idea behind the Center, that women had a place from which we would organize different activities, and from there we would go somewhere, while they had a place where they could come to. There are cases when they were not even aware that their human rights were being violated. "Ahh, so you mean he doesn't have the right to stop me?" "No, he doesn't have the right to tell you when to go out of the house, or when to want to send your ill children to the doctor, or when you have a hemorrhage and you want to go the doctor. It's not a shame! You have the right to go and receive treatment." You know, these were the problems at that time, I'm talking about the beginning of the '90s. It was so acute, so accumulated, that it was strange that nobody else thought about doing it. But that's how it was, since I was already working, I thought about it and started, established the Center for the Protection of Women and Children and we started working with them. (smiles)

After they fired me as a pediatrician from the children's department, I started working also for Mother Theresa, as I told you. And I was working at the Center with Dom Lushi and others at *Nëna Tereza*. But, at the same time I was working at the Council for [Defense] of Human Rights and Freedoms. I started noticing differences in reporting about women, but continued to collaborate with women's groups and individuals from the former Yugoslavia. We claimed, believed that if we knew each other better, if

we collaborated more, and we had collaborated a lot during the different wars that started in Croatia and then in Bosnia, that we could at least prevent the war in Kosovo.

In Kosovo there was a peaceful movement led by Mr. Rugova, then President Rugova, a resistance which looked beautiful from the outside. And it was the first time in the Balkans that against a repression of such scale, the one that the Serbian power exerted against Albanians in the former Yugoslavia... it was a beautiful idea and movement in Kosovo, where it was pretty harsh. For me personally, when the war began, it was some kind of... unfortunately, a kind of liberation. Those years of the apartheid were very hard because the dignity of every person in Kosovo was stepped on. Believe me, it wasn't just the fear because for a moment we started losing that fear, because practically we had nothing more to lose, but they disgraced our dignity, every time, for everything. I remember in Lakrishte two kids had a fight, one Albanian child and one Serbian child. They took the Albanian kid's father even though the Albanian child did not do anything, he was just defending himself. They took him, they imprisoned him, they maltreated him, and we reported [the incident] to the Council of Human Rights.

Or in many other cases, I remember once I was with my niece in the car and I knew that anytime the police stopped me, I was hit in the head with a baton, and it was impossible to do something. And I begged the policeman, "Please don't hit me in the head or something, I've got my niece in the back, don't let her experience the language, don't let her experience evil, don't create hatred in her." And I surprised the policeman, and for the first time I was stopped and I was not hit in the head with a baton {moves head backwards as if being hit} or neck, or anywhere. I begged him not to... "Here are the documents, please."

I mean, it was so undignified to live in Kosovo in those years, that I have no words that can explain it, there is no word. Again, I'm thinking, while from the outside we were worshipped for our patience, within Kosovo there was a need for an activity which could let people vent their frustration. It was becoming so undignified to work in Kosovo and unfortunately we knew that the international community would start dealing with Kosovo only when the blood flowed, even though the conflict in the former Yugoslavia started with the Albanian protests for liberty and equality, not for independence, but for equality among the other countries of Yugoslavia. Then, also in 2001-2002 [ed: the reference must be to 1991-1992] with the Parliamentary Party²⁷ we organized so many protests, which transmitted the message that we were for resistance, but for an active resistance, not the passive resistance that was promoted by President Rugova, because there came a moment when we were all paralyzed by fear, when we could do nothing, when it was legitimate for every Serb individual to kill, rape, take your property, and you did not even dare to react.

Life in Kosovo was very undignified, and the first groups of KLA were formed, but although they were not organized, the people heard about them and they gave hope [to the people]. I must say that even the first groups, but also later with the establishment of the KLA, the KLA never attacked individuals,

²⁷The Parliamentary Party of Kosovo was a social-liberal political party founded in 1990 out of the Kosovo Youth Parliament by Veton Surroi. In 2004, it became part of the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK).

Serbian civilians. All the ones that were attacked during the first operations were people connected to power, people who had oppressed the Albanian population of Kosovo. In addition we, with different women's groups, were visited by some friends from Israel, from Jerusalem, with whom I cooperated. They went first to Belgrade, then they came to visit us in Kosovo. They were saying, "How is it possible?" Because they saw themselves what was happening. "How is it possible that with all these people nobody has developed terrorism in Kosovo? How come you, Albanians of Kosovo, don't go out, out of Kosovo and act? How is this possible?"

So, there existed a kind of discipline and homogeneity in the Albanian population in Kosovo and in South Serbia or how they are calling it now, Eastern Kosovo. In Macedonia it was impossible. There was a discipline and there was a will. It was not fear, because now they say that it was fear of the Serbian military, which was the fourth most developed army in Europe. No, no. It was more of a discipline and an awareness that this way we were breaking some taboos. One taboo was that Albanians always react violently with guns, and this was a propaganda, which for fifty years Serbia had propagated in the world. This was a huge surprise, but it was too hard to keep.

Every activity that was organized in Kosovo was resistance, because for us reporting the rapes of women was resistance, offering safety to women or civilians in Kosovo was resistance, developing the education system was resistance. It was resistance not to leave any Kosovar without bread, it was resistance. It was trivial resistance for Serbia, and Serbia did not buy it for a moment. They wouldn't see us with dignity, they did not want to discuss our future. So every activity that women undertook, all the people, but it was women who organized especially mass demonstrations of resistance...

The protests for Drenica were organized, started, initiated, in the Centre for Protection of Women and Children. We called women's groups and [women] from political parties. We called them and organized them, the idea was... I have to admit that my idea was to not go only with bread when Drenica was under siege, but to go also with packets of sanitary napkins. But as the women members of political parties discussed it, the next day before leaving they said, "No, no way." We went to buy sanitary napkins... "No way, no way!" Because to speak about "sexuality" {makes quotation marks with hands} or about reproduction, or any other women's issue, was almost shameful. So, we were not allowed. The climate was, if we did such protest, it would have diverted the attention from our primary goal, which was to liberate Drenica under siege.

Later, [there were] protests, not only these but also many other protests in front of the international organizations that worked in Kosovo, mainly the High Commission for Refugees, which did not help the Kosovo people, even though they were displaced from their houses, because they were dealing only with [Serbian] refugees from Croatia who were brought by Serbs on trains after Operation Storm in Croatia. They did not help the Albanian population even though they all were [displaced] in the mountains. We women's groups went to the mountains of Berisha, to Pagarusha, and other places, to Dragobil, and offered help as much as we could. That's why it was a very challenging situation... I cannot say that it was difficult, not even now when I think about it, because at that moment it was a very natural part of our work. We were part of that population and we took the courage to do something, it was our obligation. Also at the Center it was our obligation to help people, not just

women and children, but all people. So, these were the years of the '90s, when we did a lot of work here but also abroad. We cooperated with all women's groups of the former Yugoslavia, but also from abroad.

In the year 1992, when I just started to create a group of workers who mainly worked as doctors, we went to villages all around Kosovo, and not only to offer medical services but to train - in cases of police attacks, or what to do in cases of massive rapes, how to protect yourself, how to protect afterwards... and other things. We promoted the vaccination of children, vaccination against chemical poisons, we had our experience in schools, and different poisons²⁸ were thrown in the classes.

At the end of January 1992, beginning of February, Italian women organized a conference, a conference in the framework of the project that was called Bridges of Women on Two Sides of the Adriatic, *Ponte di Donne Oltre i Confini*, the borders referred to both sides of the Adriatic. And the idea during that conference in January, which continued in February, was, for women who were active in society, to create some centers in the former Yugoslavia. At that time they were already divided, one in Zagreb, one in Pristina, one in Tuzla, where there were the majority of refugees from Srebrenica who survived the massacre, the genocide of Srebrenica, and one in Pančevo, Serbia, Vojvodina. So it was decided that altogether we collect funds, and create these four centers, which would be like reference points for collaboration among women from former Yugoslavia, and it would all be supported by the *Centro delle Donne di Bologna* [Women's Center in Bologna].

This way we gained the first donations in Bologna, when the women of Bologna got together and sold tickets around the city and Eqrem Maqi, an Albanian from Albania who owned a cinema in Bologna, Cine Fossolo, lent us the cinema for free and famous Italian artists performed there. We took the fund and bought medicine and other necessary things to start our Center, those were the first donations that were collected. Then, the women of Bologna organized to help these four centers with an Italian NGO that received donations from European funds. We had an Italian representative who worked in Pristina and he was like a protection for us. We continued working without an official office. We used to work, we gathered at *Nëna Tereza*. This was February 1992.

In September of '93 a fantastic woman from Pristina joined the group, Sevdije Ahmeti, who started to document our work and what we were doing. So we did not report individually, but we wrote reports on women's rights in Kosovo. Later on, we found a place where we started to work, and where we started to have more activities not only about health, not only about health education, but we organized and taught, prepared the students for big demonstrations, on how to protect [themselves] from poisons, how to protect [themselves] from attacks. We created a place where all women's groups gathered, but not only women's groups in Kosovo. Practically as a Center we were the first

²⁸ In 1990 thousands of children attending Albanians schools suffered from poisoning and although investigations never came up with an explanation for the disease, there was a strong suspicion that the poisoning was intentional. For this see Julie Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1999.

non-governmental organization in Kosovo. *Motrat Qiriazit*²⁹ had started working, but *Motrat Qiriazit* was [engaged] only in education and in Has, and they were mixed, men and women. The Center for Protection of Women and Children was a group for women and children, and since we reported about human rights, we created a big network in the whole world, from South Korea, the Philippines, Japan, South Africa, Algeria, the United States of America of course, Ecuador, Canada, Norway, and Italy of course.

The Italian women were like sisters for the Center, for every need...for example, once while in '97, there were attacks, there was war, we were attacked from both sides, but it was a difficult situation especially in Drenica. And we had many cases of rape but there were also many cases of appearance of snakes from the explosions that happened. And we were completely blocked, we did not have for example antivenom vaccines, and women from Italy carried it on themselves. I informed them, they bought the serum and brought it through Skopje airport, they came, they entered Kosovo, and they brought it. Then we went to Drenica afterwards and gave the vaccines to all of them. We did everything, we had an amazing team of women.

Just during the year '98, for example, we documented [violations of human rights] from 12 October 1998 till 25 March 1999. Our group from the Center for the Protection of Women and Children went to do field-work, went to war zones 175 times during two years, there were no Saturdays or Sundays. And we created three large centers where we left the medicines and the other things: one was in Sedlar, now is called Shalë, at the Shamolli's; one was in Bellaqevc, in Bardh të Madh at the Krasniqi's; one was in Pole, in the Dukagjin region, at the Catholic Church (smiles), with the Catholic priests. And we left the material there, and when we went there they all told us which place had needs, which family, where the displaced were and we went there. Or they called us, or we had women who had gone into labor. So it was a fantastic team, Sanija, Sevdije, Samka, Meli and Fatlumja, who was the accountant who practically took care of the books, and Fatlumja came to the field, we all had to take pictures, document.

Then reporting... Sevdije reported, it was fantastic teamwork. There were cases, for example, we would go to Drenica, go to the Berisha mountains. They informed us that they burned a family and the remains of the family had been left outdoor, one man who was paralyzed and a farming engineer who had stayed with his father, they left them... and we went to take pictures but there were also so many sick people. We went to the Berisha mountains. But on our way we had also two women who gave birth, they told us that they had to give birth. So Sanija, Selimja, the three of us were in a car, and from the mosque we went to Komoran, there is a mosque on the way to the Berisha mountains. Serbian snipers were in the mosque and they were shooting. They didn't shoot directly at us, they shot near the tires [of the car] to scare us. Sanija said, "Vjosa, we are going to save one or maybe two people, but we are leaving so many orphans!" Sanija had three children, Samka had one, Selimja three or four, I don't remember. She said, "We are going to help one or two people but we are leaving many orphans

²⁹NGO founded by Igballe and Safete Rogova (interview with Safete available on this website) in the 1990s to promote women's and girls' education. It was named after the Qiriazit sisters, who founded the first school for girls in Korça (Albania) in 1892.

here.” But she never said, “No,” never.

We never discussed whether we should or shouldn't go. We went and we always had cases, once while going to Pjetërshticë they informed us that one woman went into labor and was bleeding very much, she was displaced somewhere from Prekaz. On our way there we passed Sedlar, and we were going to Pjetërshticë, the KLA soldiers said to us that it was dangerous, and we should not go. The woman was dying, we needed to take that woman somehow to save her... “Don't go!” It wasn't maybe fifty meters from us that the Serbian military saw us and threw a grenade and they opened a crater... we were scared, because maybe they weren't that big, but stones fell on our car. They shot, we left the car near a tree and we continued on foot. And we went with one blanket. We were four, we three and Mevlyde from Sedlar, from Shalë, where we had left the medicines. We went and carried that woman... we had two kilometers to arrive in Pjetërshticë when they had shot at us, we carried her with a blanket, the four of us. Now, we couldn't go by car, it was an old Panda³⁰ that the Italians had given us and slowly we took her to Pristina with Selime and Samka. And we took her to *Nëna Tereza* and she survived, that woman survived and she gave birth to her baby. We walked back to Sedlarë, Shalë and I, we waited to go back to the car or do something, walk to the main street to return to Pristina, go anyway we could.

We had different cases, but beside the work done during war, the impact of the Center was that women's voices were heard. They listened to women who said what they wanted. Women were mobilized not just as part of the resistance, because it was very hard to put forward the case of women in a situation in which we were all oppressed. We had cases in which the political parties caused us problems. In the years 1994-1995 we had training with Minnesota Advocates of Human Rights, and after the training with them in Sofia, we decided to organize twenty workshops in Kosovo to explain women's rights to women. And then ... in the first session twenty were announced, in the second round, in the second session of the training workshop, after some explaining, we gave some 1280 questionnaires to women from all over Kosovo, every city, village, different territories of Kosovo, so they could fill out the questionnaire, understand the situation of women's rights and especially domestic violence. The results were terrible, terrible... women asked us, “So, you mean, if I make a mistake my husband does not have the right to beat me up?” There were different things, but only in Prizren we could not collect them, because the political parties in Prizren, the LDK [Democratic League of Kosovo] at that time, organized a campaign against us and they did not threaten us, but they warned women that we were all under oppression and we could not dare criticize, because we were in a general situation of oppression and apartheid and could not address issues that had no priority. They were of crucial importance for us because women did not have freedom of movement, and children died, or women died from diseases that could be prevented. For us it was important that they could be prevented. For the political parties in Kosovo, especially for the LDK, it was like a breach of the internal national unity that was projected everywhere and they started to accuse us.

There was a case, one of the political leaders criticized me on one occasion, he said, “Vjosa, what you are doing with women it is not patriotic.” He had invited me as a representative of an international

³⁰ Small FIAT.

organization, I needed to explain to him that the Center for the Protection of Women and Girls is not an international organization. Yes, it was registered in Bologna because that was a way to protect us from the Serbian government, but in Kosovo it was officially part of *Nëna Tereza*. We had the documents signed by Jak Mita who was the executive director at that time, and also by me as the director and founder of the Center for the Protection of Women and Girls. We had the registration papers with which we could legalize it in a way as a branch of *Nëna Tereza* so we could work. In Italy, we were registered in Bologna as one of the four centers, it was part of the project. So we had a kind of protection, an umbrella, but that did not mean much for our men. They did not see it as valuable and there were many cases when they would politically call on us. In the beginning, I would go when they called me, then I started to completely ignore them. Sevdije was accepted, because she wrote reports and Sevdije went because she was a bit older than I, so she went and talked to them. Practically she kept the connections with the LDK. I would only communicate on a different basis. They expected that NGOs would ask permission from them for any activity, not only for the protests.

Then, when the KLA started to appear, the same happened. We went to do fieldwork for example and the KLA would stop us {changes the tone of the voice} “Where are you going? Let us check the medicines. Who gave you permission to enter our territory?” For example once in Malishevo they stopped us and they would not let us leave. There was the case where the army had intervened in Rahovec³¹ and the whole population was leaving, they were going to Malishevo. We had entered Malishevo, we knew where to go and help people. Back then I was the only one with a car, since I did not want to put other women at risk, but I had an English activist with me. We went to the hospital of Malishevo and practically we just treated the wounded with the director of the Malishevo hospital. But later on, KLA soldiers arrived and without asking who I was, they started, “Who has allowed you to enter our territory? Where is your permission from Adem Demaçi,³² where is your written permission?” I got very upset and told him, “Go away, I am Vjosa Dobruna and I will not recognize your legal authority here. This is my place as much as yours. I have as much right as you do, so do not approach me.” Even though we delivered some babies, some babies had died, a woman died ... I mean it was a catastrophic situation. And they came and said, “Who has given you permission to enter?” So, for us as women there were many doubts.

I must admit that in the region of Dukagjini we never had problems, never, never, never! All the churches were open, were open for us. We left the medicines there, we left the women to give birth in churches. Even in Binqa we had our place, even though it was ... we also brought condoms. Even the French sisters saved the medicines for us, they gathered the patients. And the women went, the ones who were abused went to the church in Binqa and we treated them. Also, we treated [women] in the church of Napol, we treated [them] in the church of Klina, we never had problems with the KLA in the region of Dukagjin. Ramush Haradinaj invited us to train them, to give them lectures on sexual diseases. He called us, we were there all the time, but he called us. In some other parts we had

³¹ In July 1998, Serbian police regained control of Rahovec after a KLA offensive and many civilians were killed in the aftermath. See Human Rights Watch, *Under Orders*, 2001.

³² Adem Demaçi (1936-) is an Albanian writer and politician and longtime political prisoner who spent a total of 27 years in prison for his nationalist beliefs and activities. In 1998 he became the head of the political wing of the Kosovo Liberation Army, from which he resigned in 1999.

problems until they got used to us, until they got used to us, because they knew that we had entered from the side of Guri i Plakës, we had entered in Drenica or we entered from the side of Napol, so after some time they learned about our routes. Or we would enter from Komoran and then after some time we could not do that because it started to be blocked. We could not enter directly the gorge of Llapushnik, so we took different roads to arrive to the mountains of Berisha since there was a large population there.

Those were years that now, when I look back, I do not say, “Why were we not afraid?” But I think of it as something natural, as a part of living in Kosovo. And I am proud about women’s courage. The women of the Center were fantastic, we took groups of other women, because no other group of women went to the field to offer services. We took women journalists to write reports, not only Sevdije, and they also wrote, we distributed photos to different agencies. Besides offering services, I simply consider these years to have paid off, and if we went to the field 175 times and every time we saved a life or we made life easier for people, then it was worth it. Besides this, during these years, from February ‘92 until 24 March, on 25 we did not go to work that day because on the first night³³ they [Serbian troops] entered the Center and demolished and stole everything.

During those years we had been doing so much networking that every woman of the Center was connected with different groups, not only with Italians, with Austrians, with women from Austria, Norway, Sweden... Kvinna till Kvinna helped us a lot. American women helped us a lot, I mean, a kind of global solidarity was created with the women of Kosovo, and practically it changed the image of the war. They would see that we had the same face, it was not a war they knew before. They were aware about their role in society, that they could do something about their society, they were not uneducated, poor women, but took the opportunity and had the will to help others. And some kind of a different image for the movement of the resistance in Kosovo was created. It was not only what men presented, but it was also another face, the face of Kosovo women, it was a face of the resistance in Kosovo which was not aggressive, it did not promote war, it did not promote revenge, but it promoted survival. And it promoted an active resistance that was not necessarily the gun, even though I have nothing against it ... {puts her hand on her chest}.

When the KLA came forward, it had become enough, it was the last moment for someone to get back at the Serbian troops, not the Serbian civilians but the Serbian troops, because it was impossible to resist and to have mental health, and to live with any kind of dignity in Kosovo... it was impossible. They [Serbs] could enter [our] houses whenever they wanted, day and night. Even after many years passed, I could not close my eyes for so many years because I always heard the steps of those who were coming to take me. During these years, I have been to the police station eleven times. I was questioned eleven times, as they say ... I was beaten up eleven times. Many times they came to take me at night. After the war, for a long time I could not hear someone walking on the stairs by night, I could not. Then I woke up as I heard somebody walking in the street, I woke up and I could not sleep anymore. For years I had the phobia of driving in some parts of Kosovo, because they reminded me of the moments when they took us from the car, they beat us, they tortured us. For many years I had

³³ The year must be 1999, the night of March 24 was the first night of the NATO bombing.

different fears, different traumas that were not only mine. When talking with other people from Kosovo they said, “Ah! Vjosa, you as well, we all thought that you are stronger.” We all tried to pretend that we were stronger so we could help others but not because we were strong, the fear existed, it was terrible.

For example, I had a pair, I will never forget it, I had a pair of shoes with a brand...I always wanted to buy expensive shoes, dark blue Bruno Magli, and everyone said that when they were questioned in the police station, besides being beaten, they also were sexually harassed. The first time when they sent me to the police station I was wearing those shoes, I left the police station in the center of Pristina and I was walking, looking at my shoes the whole time saying, “Oh, these shoes brought me luck. I will never stop wearing them.” And many times when I talked with the now-deceased - because later on I talked with - Bajram Kelmendi, he told me, “Vjosa, tell me immediately when they call you, do not go the police without me.” And we always laughed with Bajram when he said, “Are you wearing your Bruno Magli shoes?” I would say, “Yes.” “Did they beat you up?” Because when Bajram came, they entered and threw him out, there was a different case ... I said, “No, no, I passed this time without sexual harassment, and the shoes are bringing me luck.” Even when they deported me from Kosovo, I wore the same shoes. Those shoes lasted for a long time and I kept them since I had this fixation that they protected me. One creates any kind of mechanism to protect oneself from fear.

In the end they were terrible years for the Albanian population of Kosovo, they were terrible. If somebody asked me what were your dreams, were they fulfilled, for me the biggest dream that was fulfilled was Kosovo’s liberation, and that Kosovo is independent. And, I did not know if I should be happy, because I dreamed of it and everyone in Kosovo dreamed about it. The repression was such, that there are no words to explain it, there are not... it was terrible. I am part of the group called Women’s Court of Violence Against Women which is a global network. We were in Cape Town and we listened to the testimonies of the comfort women from the Philippines, and how they were forced to serve the Japanese army during the Second World War, Philippine women and women from Korea and Asian women. I heard what women of Bosnia, Kosovo and South Africa had experienced. It was a period when they experienced it and in a way the population knew. For women of Kosovo there was no such report. Even today, 14 years after the war, almost twenty years from the apartheid, we still do not have a monument that was built for the women of Kosovo. We still do not have a trial that denounces the violence against women in Kosovo, the repression practiced against the women of Kosovo.

This means that there was no national and international justice for Albanian women in Kosovo, even though women worked a lot to denounce the violence that was perpetrated, but there is... it is not a patriarchy anymore, this is machismo, that never decreased for Albanian women, never decreased for women. It continued to be like that even after the war. And today, after [all] the advocacy for women’s rights and women’s participation in Kosovo public life, we still have cases when women are represented in the elections only because of the quotas, but not because of an attitude, it is... we still do not have a society that is quite open, that accepts women as equal, even though, I personally believe that women of Kosovo are much more prepared than the men. Look at the parliament, thirty percent of women in the parliament of Kosovo are much better than seventy percent of our men. They

are more active, more articulate and they are more just and they have a democratic approach and they are more open towards any issue that is discussed in Kosovo's parliament.

As I said, the Center was created as a reference point for women's activism in the resistance, but in the meantime it was kind of a Center for networking in the world. Practically, we became part of many networks, so when the United Nations Conference on Women was organized in Beijing, we were there. But normally, we had problems to leave former Yugoslavia, we had problems going there, we did not have money. The LDK women, the party... but we, from the civil society, how could we go? We did not have income. So, one day they called me, at that time she was the president of the German Bundestag, Rita Süßmuth, to talk about an activity and she asked me, "Are you going to Beijing?" I said, "No, I do not have funds to go in Beijing. And to get a visa from the Chinese, and I am from Kosovo, it is very hard." The OSCE [Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe] Ambassador in Bosnia at the time was Angela Koning, another very strong German woman. She said, "We will deal with this," us Kosovo women, all the visas, tickets, everything.

And so it happened we went to Beijing with their help, and immediately we formed a group, and we started to lobby for Kosovo women's rights. At the same time, we showed solidarity with other women. So when we looked at the groups, I was in the group for women's rights... women's political rights and there was another group with short women, and I asked them where were they from, they said from Canada. "They do not look like they are from Canada." She said no, they are women in solidarity with women from Tibet. I immediately became part of that group and they gave me a badge, but as I saw, it was a tense situation. We slept in some apartments made by the Chinese in Huaru, some rooms that looked like apartments, many of us shared them. One night, a woman who was speaking Albanian came. She wanted to meet me and she said, "I would kindly ask you to not hang out with the group from Tibet, [if you do] you will not be welcomed in China." For me it was very strange, first of all I was surprised that she spoke Albanian, then I was surprised that it was a kind of threat. Then I noticed that ... I just smiled and dropped it. I went to tell the group that was in solidarity with the women of Tibet what happened. But I noticed that a woman, she was behind us, she followed us Albanians from Kosovo and Albania. Now, not only women originally from Tibet were with the group of Canadian women, it was also we Albanians. We had a place where we went to make a common strategy with the groups of women's non-governmental organizations from former Yugoslavia. We went where, we gathered and always worked together. Kosovo women were very active in every working group when they prepared the platform; we split very well.

Reproductive rights ... I was in the group of reproductive rights, and a woman from the LDK, actually two of them worked in the group on women's political rights. In the beginning I was [in the group] of political rights, then I left because no one was in the group of reproductive rights, since I was already working in reproductive rights, and plus I was a doctor, it was more natural. And there was a part, they were active, a part of the network where I belonged, *Our Body Ourselves*, I was part of that group earlier, so I was more active there. We spread in all working groups, women from Kosovo split and we gave our contribution to all platforms. We could comment, and our comments were welcomed since we had a lot of experience of passive resistance, and we had a lot of experience of networking throughout the world. So we had a lot of experience and we could contribute a lot, so in a way when

they prepared the platform, we all felt it as part of us. Because our ideas were very acceptable and we all had it as a dream, “Eh, one day when we will be free, we will have the opportunity to implement this platform in independent Kosovo.” It is true that parts of the platform were implemented, it is not all black. But there were parts that remained taboo, and there is a lack of common will and a favorable environment to address it, no matter how much advocacy women made, we have the machismo that I mentioned before. We were ridiculed if, as women of Kosovo, we asked for full equality, or if we demanded to talk about taboo topics. Because this issue is not considered a national priority for Kosovo.

But we are where we are. We made much progress, we have done a lot for the women’s group in Kosovo, in the ‘90s and after the ‘90s, but especially during the ‘90s, we raised many important issues for the Albanian society in Kosovo. When I look at it now, it is phenomenal, it is a great contribution to the development of the society. And I believe that as time passes it will be appreciated more. We raised the issue of education, and not only because we worked actively on this issue, but we reported, animated, worked with high school students, with elementary schools. We started discussions about human rights and women’s rights in schools during the apartheid. The Center organized talks. We included all schools of Kosovo that were in the project. We organized lectures in all schools of Kosovo, high schools for human rights. We contributed to developing the curricula for citizenship rights during the apartheid.

We did a tremendous job, it was a 25 hour work day {smiles}. There was some kind of a very good camaraderie because we talked about health, at the Center. So even when the police came, they came very often, they saw us providing services. We hid a computer, we kept it with all the data at Sevdije’s because I was suspicious to them. They took me to the police station very often, there was no point to leave it in my apartment because I knew the first time they would check my house they would take it, so we kept it at Sevdije’s. We kept parallel [storage]: one computer, one desktop to store the documentation. We used the phone, my parent’s phone until late, when mobile phones came out we had mobile phones. I was lucky because one international organization was paying for my phone, not local calls, but roaming. So I could communicate easily, but it cost a lot for Kosovo citizens who called from different war territories to call me. But it worked well, better than Mobtel in Kosovo, so we could communicate better. This kind of work continued until 25 March ‘99, during the month of February... January and February I was in Austria. Even the cardinal of the Austrian Catholic Church, cardinal König, participated together with me in talks on the repression in Kosovo held in some churches.

The Austrian church gave big donations for the population of Kosovo, not just money, very little money, but mostly different materials as relief for *Nëna Tereza*. This is where they started to fund the Center for the first time, but what happened? Rambouillet³⁴ happened at that time, and I returned when the bombing occurred... So all of the aid that was collected during those weeks in Austria, they brought it to the refugee camps, and to the Center that I created, that I created in Tetovo, as refugees. After they forced us out from Kosovo... actually on the 25th I need to tell you, we hid, we had an

³⁴ The Conference of Rambouillet (Paris) in February 1999 was the last, failed effort to negotiate a peace between Milošević and the KLA.

entrance in the basement that did not have windows, and you could enter from a building. We had the Serbs who were armed, civilians, at the entrance, they were very armed. We had a basement on the ground floor, you could enter the building from the basement, so all Albanians used the basement as entrance. By three o'clock, they called me on the phone, I am telling you I had my phone with a foreign number, from another country, and they told me that they had set the *Çarshia e Madhe*³⁵ in Gjakova on fire and they had killed an OSCE employee in Gjakova, and they had killed Doctor Izet... they had killed an activist, actually an OSCE employee, they had taken Bajram Kelmendi and his two sons,³⁶ and a friend of mine from Belgrade called me, Nataša Kandić.³⁷

So I got out from the basement and went to the other building to my parents, to see if I could send text messages with my phone, when a neighbor came and said to me, "Vjosa you are jeopardizing the whole entrance, the police is coming to get you." It was all dark and my father came and went out from the basement to accompany me to the building, and I told him, "Dad I am leaving, I am leaving since they are coming!" I saw my father closing the door, I saw that the lights went out at the entrance, but the entrance was with an intercom, but there was no electricity. They wanted to break the door, I had time to run out before they entered from there. So I escaped from the balcony of the living room and I stayed about five-six days in the other entrance of my neighbors, in the other building. Then my friend's husband came to take me, they covered me with a blanket during the entire day, and we went to another house, then another house. At twenty five, twenty nine before noon ... I went to see if my parents were alive and they caught us on the street, my sister, her husband and their child who was eleven months old and me. And all of us who were in the car were beaten up, they stole everything we had, gold, money and they kicked us out of Kosovo.

We stayed about five-six-seven days at the border, I have the photos, in no man's land, first at the border, since the Macedonians closed the borders, then in Bllace. Then I went to Tetovo. I established a Center with the women from the Center of Pristina who were refugees in Macedonia and we started working in the camps. We also worked at the Center, two stayed at the Center because we had a phone and all the men and women who wanted to reunite with their family members [used it], because neither the Red Cross nor other organization were as fast in helping reunions and they did not know where their family members were in the camps. Therefore this place was created where all women who were raped, tortured went for visits. Immediately after nine days that we established the Center, we rented [a place] at the Colorful Mosque in Tetovo. We rented a place, my sister with her husband, both architects, built some walls to create a venue like a store, they made some walls and things...and everyone started to bring computers, medicines. Women who had worked in the Center gathered there, and some other women did voluntary work, and we created another Center, we created another place. It functioned until we returned to Kosovo, it functioned with women from Tetovo until the end of '99.

³⁵ Literally Big Market, old part of Gjakova.

³⁶ Bajram Kelmendi was a lawyer and human rights activist. He filed charges against Slobodan Milošević at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in 1998. On the first day of the NATO war in 1999, Serb police arrested him with his two children Kastriot and Kushtrim. Their bodies were found the next day.

³⁷ Nataša Kandić (1946-) is a prominent Serbian human rights activist and founder of the Belgrade-based Humanitarian Law Center.

We did not have [means], but we wanted to start the Center, we could not support the Center either, we did not have the means. But we left them the ultrasound machine, a fully equipped gynecological office, a pediatric office, computers, we left half of the things there, and we brought the other half to start the Center here in Pristina after the war. But they did not continue the work, because there was already a system in place there, they did not see the need to start working as we did. We returned to Kosovo, I will never forget the first day we returned to Kosovo. It was 16 June, I returned with the representative of USAID for Kosovo, Frank Pavich. Frank brought us to Kosovo with his car. I immediately went to the apartment, when I went to the apartment, of course they had stolen everything, they had destroyed everything, they had stolen everything. And we went...

The city was empty, some people were confused, I did not know anyone, we went to the Center 1 Tetori, and we reported to the Gurkhas³⁸ because there was something suspicious in the corridor. And the Gurkhas came immediately, the unit of mine clearing checked with their tools and they found this ring. They found a personal landmine covered with old clothes, because they had stolen everything, destroyed everything. The apartment had a batch of old clothes, they were left there, and a mine was left there; they closed the apartment and said to me, "Do not come around until we clear the mine, but it will take some time since apartments are not a priority to us, the streets are. Call us after one month." But I could not wait one month, I returned to Macedonia, then on the 18 I returned again here, I would come and go all the time until the middle of August, when I returned to Kosovo for good.

I did not have a place to live since everything was destroyed, they had burned down my house in Gjakova on the first night, they had burned it all, and then they had torn it down, they did not leave anything. Here in Pristina, they had destroyed the building, they had stolen everything, there were no windows, no doors... I mean, there was a door that you could lock with a wire from the outside, with a key, but it was not a normal door. I did not have any window, I had nothing, it was all destroyed like all of Kosovo, but in Pristina one could not notice it much, because generally it was not visible outside, but the apartments of some people were all destroyed inside. They had not left photos, anything, they had stolen all of them. You feel a little detached when you return to your place after being a refugee for three months. Besides working at the Center those three months, I did a lot of advocacy for NATO intervention. Kosovo was already empty. Besides working in the camps we collected documentation about rapes and different forms of violence, not only in Macedonia but in Albania as well. We assigned some young girls to go to the camps in Albania.

I traveled a lot during those three months, I made a presentation in Sharp near Brussels with other activists on the situation of civilians, because I was constantly in touch with... every zone, we had their satellite numbers and I called them, I received reports continuously, from every zone. I used to take the report and I knew a lot about what was happening, I am talking about the civilian population, I am not talking about... so I made a lot of presentations in Italy, Belgium, England, at the Italian Senate, the American Senate, I talked in all important world-known televisions. I gave interviews to Israeli, Japanese, Chinese, Russian newspapers, not to talk about English and American [newspapers].

³⁸ Indigenous people mostly from Nepal, and special military forces within the British army.

This was part of my work in those years, the war was supposed to be finished, the citizens were supposed to return to their homes, one should not have allowed Milošević with his regime to empty Kosovo entirely. Even though one million was outside, and the other were in Kosovo, they were all displaced, Kosovo was totally “out of tune,” but we were not supposed to allow that to happen at the end of the 20th century. For a population that had not done any harm to anyone for many years {smiles}, and did not attack anyone, to come to this stage, it was really an issue of global ethics, if they allowed what happened in front of cameras, what happened to Kosovo and did not react to it.

When I returned to Kosovo, I felt emptiness, people were free, but what I am proud of, no matter that they say that there was violence after [the war]...the Albanian population returned immediately to Kosovo. Many people had good lives in England, Germany, but all of them returned. They did not cause trouble to anyone, Kosovo’s population returned to a completely destroyed place, we lived like that for years. The population of Kosovo respected the traffic lights because they knew where the traffic light was, the police did not come to tell you, “Stop at this traffic light!” There were no traffic lights but they stopped where there used to be traffic lights, the cars also stopped. The violence they are talking about now, that was committed after... I think it was a low level of violence, even though every violence is big, but in comparison with the size of the population and with what happened in Kosovo, it was very small.

There was no police, when we returned to Kosovo there was no police, no courts, nothing was left. The population behaved, I mean there were individual cases, but the majority of the population behaved with such dignity. For a population that was raped so much, so long, to behave, to return to their home and to behave with such dignity, this has happened only in Kosovo. There are individual cases, there was a huge propaganda that exaggerated and talked about them. It is not human to talk about things that were so rare in comparison with how the majority of the population behaved. They returned and did not find [their] homes, they did not find their family members, they found raped women, they were taken.... they came back. They lost everything, and these people did not take revenge on Serbs. There was an atmosphere of dignity, that return of people, that optimism, that glory of the population. Returning to nothing, to find nothing, after all that repression, and have the will to start from the beginning, from zero, to return to a place where you do not have your pictures anymore, to a place where your home is not there anymore, where you do not know anything, when you do not know where your family is, where they tried to erase your past and history. They did not destroy our documents when they deported us. That year was full of dignity, no matter what they say.

As I said, during this time, during these years, we have experienced many things and we made a lot of contacts, I had contacts in America from before, but after these years I did not work only at the Center, I worked in *Nëna Tereza*, I was a board member of SOROS in Belgrade for Kosovo, activities ... so I was part of a network of organizations that allowed me [to collaborate] later on with the Helsinki Committee in Stockholm, and other organizations, not to mention them all. I was also connected earlier and I reported to Physicians of Human Rights in Boston, then with Human Right Watch in New York and we reported to them. These organizations made it possible, they called us very often to report, to make presentations about human rights in Kosovo in the whole world. In America there was a very good network of organizations with which I worked for years, more than ten years. So they

made it possible for me to have a presentation in the Senate, a testimony in the Senate. I met several times with the First Lady Hillary Clinton during the bombing and the Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who was a fantastic woman!

Women... the population in Kosovo had a lot of support in America, and it still has, there was so much genuine support for freedom, it is incredible. The presentations, the meetings that I had with Hillary Clinton, with Madeleine Albright, with the members of the Senate, women of the Senate, women of the Congress but even with the men, not only with the Caucus headed by Eliot Engel, but with other groups as well, also with senators, congressmen who were not members of the Caucus, I will never ever forget it.

We had an interview on the Larry King Show, with American senators. The senators and I had on the phone the then Ambassador in the United Nations of what was left from former Yugoslavia – Serbia and Montenegro, I was on the Larry King Show and he was at the United Nations in New York. And the dialogue that we had, I believe I had...and he saw the arguments and the experiences that I had, but he represented his country and of course his country's politics, but I believed he had no words. He was trying to attack, but had no words to destroy arguments, my arguments. The support from the United States of America, it was not only the support from the American administration, it was the support of the American people. It was an awesome feeling, such support...for a country that maybe one could not find on the map, it was awesome on a human level, truly on a human level, and I felt really good, that at least I could present a situation without hate.

I never hated Serbians, not then, not now. I hate...I do not like, not hate because that feeling is too strong to waste on something bad. I don't like chauvinist politics, I would not want to see a population that has developed such chauvinist and discriminating politics such as the one developed against Albanian people in former Yugoslavia. I would not want to see it anywhere in the world, they can't fill me with hate, and I don't have it. Thus I had presentations not only on CNN, ABC, NBC, Hard Talk, BBC...everywhere, they weren't filled with hate, because I don't have hate in me, I feel sorry for the Serbian people, I feel sorry that they have come to a place where nobody, even the Montenegrin people with whom they share the same language, the same faith, the same culture, want to live with them. I feel sorry for Serbian people who have brought themselves to such position.

But I am living my dream – to see Kosovo free. And I am, I said that day...the day when Kosovo declared its independence, even if I died, it would not matter. Also because in the beginning I had a new energy, I needed again to do something for this place. I have this will, it may seem pathetic, but the reason that I accepted to be an ambassador is because I am proud to represent my country. I always said, "Has anyone lived a life, in which they lived during several communist systems, human socialism is was called, during the martial law and repressions, the apartheid in Kosovo, the war, the liberation and independence?" Not many people have the fate to live through all this. To me it feels like I have lived many lives, when they named me ambassador, I was so proud to represent my country, when they asked me, "What are the conditions?" I said, " I do not know," "You did not ask?" "No, I did not." They have honored me, no matter what, they have honored me, I still live today, I live the dream of an independent Kosovo {smiles}.

And I still have not had enough of that dream. I would like, for every Kosovo citizen, to live that dream. I would like to see Kosovo as a more social state, to be a more open state, not only from outside, but socially open towards everyone's rights. I would like to see Kosovo more economically developed, with open doors for other developments, social development. Because you cannot have social development without economic development. But I still believe that we are all living the dream, and the repression we lived through has come to an end.

I will never forget how, when I was studying for my specialization in Zagreb in 1986 at the clinic Shallata, the director of the clinic was Prof. Tifembah, and we, three doctors from Kosovo, for the first time three Albanian women went into pediatrics for our specialization: Zina Mekuli, Flora Brovina and I, we went, professor Tifembah was happy to see us, and he told the head nurse to assign us to our rooms. We changed our clothes in the rooms of resident doctors, and we went and the nurse...the three of us were blondes, Zina had a darker skin but was still a blonde. And the head nurse..."Oh I thought you were darker!" This is what the Yugoslavs thought of us, they thought we were sweatshop-workers, or that we sold things in the markets of Kvardic. But they couldn't understand that there were educated Albanian women, and that they would come.

After the war, there was a different environment in Kosovo, financially I lost everything. But the worst was my sisters. I had four sisters, I always said I was lucky to have four sisters. I have Pranvera, the second younger sister who came after me, she is an electrical Engineer, and she was director of KEK [Kosovo Electric Utility]. My sister Aida is an urbanist, Shkendija is a successful skin surgeon and Donika is an architect. And all three of them returned, because my father after the war said, "I did not send my kids to school to stay abroad after Kosovo has been liberated, to contribute elsewhere." And in a way he made us all come back.

Pranvera was in England working as an engineer, her husband worked as an anesthesiologist. Aida was in New York, both were working as designers, architects. At the Medical School of Graz, Shkendija was working as a skin surgeon, dermatologist and in a private clinic in Vienna she worked as a skin surgeon and dermatologist but practically we all came back. I had a chance to stay in America, I used this chance later when I went to Harvard, and I was at the Kennedy School of Government of Harvard for a one-year fellowship, where I lectured and did research on human rights. We all came back to Kosovo, mainly because of my father's insistence. My father always had an attitude, and has an attitude, that this country needs people and that we must not ask too much from this country, but we must give as much as we can. And for my father to give as much as he could was to school his children and to educate them the way he saw fit.

A part of education was always, I remember when I was 15 years old, on Sundays our father would give us books we had to read. Every day we would get together for lunch at three o'clock, but on Sundays we had to gather at one o'clock, wherever we were we had to gather for lunch. And he would start asking us about the books we had read. But when you were a teenager this starts to irritate you. I remember when I was 15, he gave me to read Cicero in Serbian language, and he wouldn't ask for my opinion as I read I read the book, but he would impose his own opinion. At the same time he

encouraged me to give arguments, not to fight, but to give arguments. He was always like that, in October was Book Fair, whatever *Rilindja* published during the year, the Book Fair took place in October, and father had a habit of buying anything that was published, and to send it to the library of the elementary and high school of Junik, which was named after my uncle Hysni Dobruna, who died the last day of the Second World War, Liberation War. One was for them, one for us [our home]. And I remember my mom being worried that we did not have a weekend house in Brezovica, or that we did not have a big house, my father would say I have five schooled children and the largest private library in Kosovo. And he would say, my kids read every book, and we had no choice but to read them because we were obligated, "You will read these, and you will read these." On Sunday we would sit and discuss the books. We were different ages but it would not matter. If we didn't finish the conversation during the week he called each of us, "Let's discuss that book."

This was true during all our education, now after war, my father has the same attitude, he called on the phone... we didn't have where to live, everything was destroyed. Pranvera, the second sister, was still in England, we went there, she had a small apartment because when they were expelled from KEK before the war they took her apartment too, then they gave her a smaller one. We lived in that apartment, the only apartment that wasn't destroyed, until she came back from England. Everyday my father picked up my phone and called, "Are you prepared to come back?" [He called] all of us until we came back to Kosovo, except my youngest sister Donika, she continued to live abroad, she didn't come back. She is from the generation that when they enrolled in the university they found it closed and went to England illegally from Macedonia. There she finished university. It was that generation, all our children, the young students who went to England and other places, a flood of asylum seekers, were all educated, it was a new wave. Earlier on they went for work, usually men left women behind in Kosovo. It was that generation when the university in Kosovo was closed, in the years '90-'91, that went abroad to attend university. At one time 7000 girls and boys from Kosovo were studying in England. All of them finished their studies, settled, only few of them came back to Kosovo.

Practically, we started from the bottom like ninety percent of other Kosovars, because no one found anything in good conditions, everything was destroyed. The good will, the enthusiasm was phenomenal. I don't know if someone has written about the good will of people, the respect, the love for country that the Albanians of Kosovo felt when they returned to Kosovo. That was phenomenal. It was biblical and historic. For me it is... I had a special feeling, every time I go back and think I remember not the 16 [June] but the 18, when I came back for the second time. I went to walk in the street of Pristina, I didn't know almost anyone, because there were so many new people. Still, people were returning and I walked in the streets to see if I saw someone I knew, if I saw something. But it was a special feeling and there I saw people waiting for the traffic lights [smiles]. But what are they waiting for, there were no traffic lights. What are they waiting for? (smiles) I went to see my sister's apartment, I saw people closing the doors of other people's houses. Let's say there were usurpations... in the first days, I saw people go and take other people's houses, they knew that those houses belonged to someone else, they took those houses... that was fantastic, phenomenal! That was something to remember.

Hillary Clinton invited us in June '97 to go to Washington, and I was with Edita Kelmendi dhe Nataša

Kandić, and since I was cooperating with UNICEF, Maureen White, the UNICEF Ambassador for the United States of America, invited us to her house in New York. Actually it was '98, June, and we went to New York, there was Kati Marton, Holbrooke's wife and his mother, and you know the prejudice about Albanians. Nataša and I were walking, and we were going to meet with her, and at the same day Holbrooke came to meet the KLA in Junik. And Holbrooke's mother doesn't know which one of us is Albanian, and which is Serbian. She saw me and Nataša and she came towards me, and she said, "My son went to meet with those animals in the mountains....Kosovo Albanians, Animals in the mountains." I was looking at Maureen, she said, "What's wrong?" "This old lady is saying this to me." She replied, "She's confused, she is thinking that you are the Serbian girl." I said, "It doesn't matter, let her speak, I will not correct her." She just couldn't handle it, after a while she went and told her quietly, "Your son went voluntarily, he is doing a mediation and Vjosa is something else, she doesn't represent the KLA, she is representing civil society." Then she came closer, and she called me to have a conversation, she said, "I apologize, but somehow you don't look like a Kosovo Albanian." For me it was very offensive. Also in ex-Yugoslavia, "You don't look like an Albanian. "Why, how do Albanians look like?" This prejudice has been transmitted all over the world, and it looks that just when Albanian women started to go abroad and advocate they changed a little the prejudice against Albanians. Especially women, somehow they imagined that women are afraid to talk, even today, there was a training for women two-three weeks ago, and the trainer came and said, "Do you have any question?" I said, "Can we give comments, and answers? Why questions? I don't think you know anything more than we do." He was a man.

This prejudice in the beginning, since we are talking about women from Kosovo, people who came to Kosovo meant it for women from Kosovo, but the prejudice exists about women in general, especially women from Kosovo, which is very actual even today. It has changed, but not much. Then, our government never reserved room for more women in public life. Even today, look at the government, the three women among them are the most successful. For me, those three are way much better than all the men there. They are more successful, more articulate, they represent Kosovo in a very dignified way, and they are less corrupt (she smiles). This is a practical argument that this place.... this Kosovo is going to move forward only when women will take half of the responsibilities for this place.

During my whole life, in one way, as every other child during her whole life, my parents influenced me a lot in my decisions, even when I grew up, when I was mature I talked to them, and it's a very interesting situation when I talk to them. My mother is very fragile, very sophisticated, but very smooth, she's always very calm in decision-making. But my father is harsher and his attitude is sharper. And immediately after the war, he obliged us to come back. Our mother did the same with her smoothness. The attitude was that, I didn't educate my children to stay abroad. Now that Kosovo is liberated, we all came back, except my little sister. Is very interesting that Aida, our third sister, came back from New York but she was working there, with her husband. Pranvera, the second sister, came back from London, she was working there, also her husband was working there as an anesthesiologist, and their children were going to school. Shkendija was recently graduated in a sub-specialization of surgery for dermatology in the University of Graz and she was working there too.

We were all back in Kosovo. And I had some options. One of the options was to go back to medicine

and continue as a doctor, open a private clinic, rebuild the Center for the Protection of Women and Children, or do something else. Being a doctor was something that didn't fulfill my needs. I had different ideas. I didn't have any more energy to continue with the Center, because I had heard a lot of testimonies for so many years and before apartheid that I didn't have anymore... Even when I was listening to the women, or when we visited them in the field, I was crying more than the members of their families who had lost someone. But in a way, I left some space to continue working. I was selected as head of the board of the organization that I established in '92, and we named a woman who worked there as the director. So, I was still involved in something that I saw as my child.

But I couldn't take the daily pain from war, I just couldn't, even though at the same time I was dealing with this, not publicly, with the support of a group of girls who were raped during the war. But we respected their identity, in our environment this is never discussed. Also the women who were raped were not willing to talk. We were a group that worked with them all the time. We have been always there for them, if they called us at 11:00PM, we would get back to them in time anywhere around Kosovo.

So I continued to work there at the same time and in the end, with UNMIK involvement, Kosovo administration was created. The idea was to create a structure which was presented as the "education" {does quotation marks with her hands}, the training of local Kosovars on governance in cooperation with the international community until the responsibility could be gradually transferred to Kosovars. This was the public rationalization. The real reason for creating the common administrative structure between UNMIK and Kosovo was to counteract and undo the existing government.

It was the Serbian government, which with different cells and with its functions was in Kosovo even 14 years after war; the government in exile led by Bujar Bukoshi and Ibrahim Rugova; and the temporary government led by Hashim Thaqi. The real reason was to undo these, and not gradually transfer the responsibilities. But ok, we accepted it to be such as it was, because all Kosovars were included in these common administrative structure. They were...all the political parties had four departments, and there was one department that was described as filled by a person who did not belong to any of these groups, and that was I. And I ran this department for democratic governance and human rights, professional independent media, and support for social society. It was as a component [of the administration], like a bureau.

We started with a co-director who was a seconded American, I don't know the expression in Albanian, how it is called, from the OSCE. I can talk only about this department. I believe that for the one and a half year that I was in this department, we did a great job because firstly, we met some good governance principles. Also with other departments and with the population, we developed the first policies related to human rights and minorities' rights in Kosovo, then women rights, children rights. I mean, for each group we developed policies which later were elaborated and turned into a regulation [UNMIK laws]. In time we developed procedures as part of good governance to prepare a new constitution.

We also worked with various laws, so-called regulations, I mean we had some obligations. We developed policies, and we put ideas into laws or... laws or regulations, before passing to another level, always went through the department. We gave our opinions based on whether they were approaching [rights] or respected rights according to various international conventions. So this year and a half was very challenging for me. It was a time which gave me strength, the knowledge that I would contribute to the foundation of Kosovo statehood, even though today I know that many things that we have done were not implemented by UNMIK. For example, UNMIK never implemented Resolution 1244 all over Kosovo. The north was excluded. Because Resolution 1244 was not implemented, now we have problems in the north, because NATO and KFOR, actually UNMIK too, never implemented it.

1244 has been implemented only by the Kosovo population, only by Albanians. Serbians never implemented it. So, even policies that we designed, that we prepared in the departments, have been implemented by the majority of our population, not by minorities. That is so sad, because the treatment has to be the same for all, also for a territory, what is called territory, which has been “one” at least based on the constitution, Kosovo as a territory with those borders, as a territory administered by UNMIK based on Resolution 1244. Whereas, during my work with UNMIK, even though it was very fulfilling and challenging enough at the same time, I was also very disappointed. Disappointing was the fact that UNMIK as a structure for the first time tried to govern Kosovo, when the United Nations did not have developed capacities for such an intervention, the administration of a territory...this was their first time. Since it was the first time, it was very, let’s just not say very...let’s make it smoother, they were not well prepared to do that, and they didn’t have expertise. At the same time they didn’t considered Kosovo’s expertise worth it.

There was an approach that looked from a distance, and there was lack of expertise. They came in the name of {gestures quotations} “knowledge and expertise,” but in fact that expertise didn’t exist. Therefore, the Constitution of Kosovo that was based on the preparation of the basic law ... it did not respect the value and the good will of the Kosovo's majority population, it was extreme. Well, a basic law was approved in the Constitution, which even at that time didn’t fill the basic needs for a democratic Kosovo. So I asked to leave the department, with the same justification, “If you don’t cooperate with Kosovo population, and make this kind of decisions, I don’t see the value of being here just as a figurehead, and in a way I am making excuses for your bad governance, therefore I am not staying.” I wrote a letter on this.

After a month I went to Harvard University, the Kennedy School of Government, with a one year fellowship focused on Human Rights. I gave lectures on human rights and transitional justice. I gave lectures especially on addressing the law and human rights and subjects that have been the center of my interests for many years. When I came back from Harvard... in reality while I was in the department we prepared the documentations for the first elections. While preparing the documentation, I noticed that very few women were involved in that process. I had the capacity because I was leading one department and the department had also one administrative obligation: registering the political parties that wanted to run in the first elections. Therefore, I got to know all the political parties, and the new parties that were created and we wrote a document in which we asked

for gender quotas to be one innovation {makes air quotes} in the electoral law. It took me seven or eight months with all the leaders, the heads of political parties, with all, to bring them to the point that they were convinced that a quota was something necessary, a gender quota, also because the women's quota gave women the privilege to be represented in the public life, in the election here.

Even though in the mess here made by the OSCE... the OSCE, no one did, women from Kosovo did it, we thought, it was my job as head of the department, I was mandated to develop this kind of politics, and I did it. My role was to negotiate, to convince the political parties, you can imagine after the war, after a long war, when the number one value for the elections was who carried weapons, because the one who carried the weapon, protected life of the people. I understand that, but also women carried the family's weapons, carried the weapon of the security of Kosovo, and realized it.

Of course the OSCE was very instrumental, because it organized the first election with the quota, practically it opened the way for the other elections and the quota became part of the election in Kosovo, which is good. It is not good because it is discriminating, because it is thirty percent, but for a population with a trauma like the apartheid, the war, in essence a rural population, patriarchal, sixty percent of the population live in villages, the quota was necessary. Otherwise, look at the case of our neighboring countries that didn't have the quota: [women] aren't seven or eight percent, not in parliament but not even in the public sphere. Therefore in a way I feel proud that I pushed the case for the quota. In the beginning, when I mentioned the quota, it was in a forum called "Forum of political parties." And when I explained the case for the quota for the first time, I don't forget the looks, the contempt and the laughter, "women now want to be involved in this job too." And I know some of them were more naïve and arrogant and they said it. Some others didn't say it, but they thought it, I could tell from their look. Others asked questions that it took me an effort to be patient with. It took me months to realize this project and in this project I really had the support of the international community.

When I returned from Harvard, the first parliament was formed after the first general elections in Kosovo. Especially for a society that is thought to be unregulated, humiliated - I cannot find the right word, we missed [respect] from the outside for a long time - for the people of Kosovo, the word dignity was very important. I am giving only one example, another example was the articles of the law. But what we did, our group had access to.... we did not discover the hot water, but we had access to the Lisbon documents that were being prepared and approved. It was the time when all countries, the parliaments of all countries were approving it. We had our connections from our network of people that were part of the Lisbon Court draft, before being introduced in the parliament. Consequently, they sent us that part and we processed the part of human rights, the articles which best fit the needs of Kosovo. We used the dictionary a lot, for the language which permeated the Lisbon Agreement, and we submitted it to the Kosovo Constitution. Also, Xhyljeta Jetishi and I developed that part on human rights for public discussion throughout Kosovo. We notified people, but we did not have other things. It was the part on human rights, with fewer minority rights because that was in another article. But this was also an experience, an involvement, a contribution of mine outside the institutions for the development of Kosovo.

Now I am looking forward to go to a state that invited me. But my situation is a bit different since I am appointed ambassador of the Republic of Kosovo in Holland, and I am not sure whether I will be able to continue that job. Last year we intervened in South Sudan and Sudan Khartoum. We intervened in Pakistan, but not really Pakistan, we intervened in the Pakistan- Afghanistan conflict from a nearby third place. So, this year we plan to intervene... not in Indonesia, and consider potential discussion in Mindanao. There are some projects, part of other projects, that even if we do not work actively by going to the conflict zone, then I support them through writings and other ways that I have from my position. It is something that interests me and I believe in it. So, it is not tiring, neither is a big concern. My concern is the problem, but work is not a concern to me. I do not see it difficult to do this job, that is why I do not have any interest to make this engagement public in Kosovo. I am interested in going somewhere and make at least a small change, and not only that, but also to have a more inclusive approach.

However, we saw that the women we selected on the basis of quotas were doing nothing, not even communicating. Therefore, I developed a group from my own network, I invited them in some way, presented, and said, "I am not feeling okay with what is happening." Also a great woman, Swanee Hunt, who has helped us a lot during the war when she was the Ambassador of the United States in Austria and a lecturer at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, she said, "Come on Vjosa I'll bring you a team, we will create a workshop, we will gather all the women of parliament and train them. We will create an effective three to four days training and as a result we will create the Women Caucus in parliament." That is what happened next, they came and stayed for a week. For three days we had intensive meetings with women, but also we had other meetings since we needed the support of men in the parliament, and the support of domestic party leaders. That's how the Women Caucus was created.

Meanwhile, the United States Embassy offered a grant on behalf of the ex- secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, who had already finished her mandate. So the foundation supporting the Caucus was created, which offered twenty thousand dollars for the first year of operation. These were the roots of the Caucus, which now is called "Non-formal Group of Women in Parliament." For me also, the first years were not so successful. The purpose was to collect women's issues so they could be focused on them and addressed them in the parliament. Also, the other purpose was to enhance the cooperation between women on a gender basis, so that political differences would not interfere in addressing gender issues. Hence, these last two to three years, we must admit that the Group of Women in parliament has started to become more active, as I had initially envisioned. During the first years, the work was not as productive as we anticipated, was very conflictual. The women from the main two parties, the LDK and the PDK [Democratic Party of Kosovo] were in such conflict that it was unimaginable. I personally could not understand how such conflict existed, when the base was very stable because the interest was mutual. It wasn't only in the interest of women and the issues addressed should have been of interest to the parliament.

Imagine, yesterday for the first time the Minister of Finance, together with a part of civil society and parliament members, addressed gender issues in the budget. We conducted the training in 2002-2003 for gender budgeting, and we did it again in 2005, 2007 and 2008. It was a series of training in gender

budgeting for the first time at the administration level, yesterday, on the 9th or 10th of July 2013. Therefore these are only some steps that I think I'm not the only one who is taking, but are being taken by a lot of women in Kosovo, and fewer men... to show a way in this society where both genders will have equal opportunities for development.

I honestly believe that without equal citizenship there is no democratic development, there is never society as an independent country if a force in whatever form, even on a gender basis or in other phases, prevails against other forces and enables inequality, and at the same time creates an atmosphere viable for conflicts. Hence, for me equality of genders and equality between citizens is a precondition for peace. Therefore, I believe in what I do, because this is the right way to act. So, with these episodes I have captured in some way that willingness to be part of governments or the administration since the beginning, and to provide what I thought is my contribution in forming the country of Kosovo. But even when I left the structure, I have never been left out completely. I have been involved in different capacities, in different projects. For example, as a member of the civil society, I have co-managed the working group which prepared the strategy for the development of Kosovo 2007-2013.

Preparations... when the drafting of the constitution of independence started, I was called as an expert again from the civil society to draft the part of human rights of the Kosovo Constitution. Also, we have worked quite a lot on the preamble, especially the part of the preamble we have insisted on, we were three people who worked on it. It was the issues of incorporating the word "dignity" because in all the debates dignity was not considered a constituting category, therefore it could not be put there. Our arguments were that the constitution is not a law per se, but is the basis for the upcoming laws. So, categories like dignity that are thought to be basic should be there.

I have little interest that these things are published in Kosovo. I'm interested that if I went somewhere, I would at least make a difference, have a more inclusive access. The experience in Kosovo, not much mine but the experience of the majority of citizens after the intervention, was quite condescending, paternalist. That's why in every job I have taken, as a consultant in Columbia with local groups, in the Dominican Republic, in Sudan, Oman, with the government of Iraq and Iraq, I helped women to develop a national platform for women's action. In Indonesia I helped the creation of a system in which the government networks with civil groups on conflict resolution by respecting responsibilities toward the state and the rights of civil society. In these and many other places I taught, and always had the approach of listening to what people want. I tried not to impose my attitude just because of my experiences in Kosovo. The interest of other people on whatever you work should be primary.

And now if I continue to be not on the front line with Resolution to Act,³⁹ but in the background, I would have the same attitude, because it became part of me, part of my attitude toward intervention. And as intervention should be in places of need we go there, the same way they came to Kosovo when we were in need. We did not need for someone to rule us, and we did not have to need for someone to

³⁹ Resolution to Act is a multi-tier campaign engaged in implementing Security Council 1325 and leading to more women in decision-making positions as key to peace-building.

tell us what to do. There was the need to become proactive in identifying experts and the expertise in Kosovo, and not the negligence or denial of this expertise. They did not make an adequate expertise in Kosovo. The selection of expertise in Kosovo continues also with our government. You asked me “Is Kosovo the way you ...?”

Dreams are always much better than the reality, and as I said it in the first part of the interview, when the independence of Kosovo was declared, even if I didn't live anymore it would be enough. I have lived to see it, and this was big. I can say what I expected, I expected, maybe it is a bit naive, pathetic ... people that suffered this long, I expected that they would appreciate the freedom and independence more. People that received the citizens' votes, I thought they would be more responsible towards citizens and follow their will. I believe that Kosovo with its new population, relatively educated, with all the existing will and energy, with the resources that Kosovo has, enough for a territory of eleven square kilometers, we will go forward faster. In the meantime [I thought] we will have a more inclusive and democratic approach since there is not a better form, it is not perfect but there is not a better form than democracy. That is why I believed, I had bigger dreams and I have bigger plans. They say, “If you want to make God laugh, tell him your dreams and your plans.” (Laughs) No, it is not what I expected, but I am still optimistic that we will work a bit more, and we will really love this place. Not to only say it with words, but also to show it with work and we will be [like that], I still believe ... We are a young population, it was the post-war shock that confused us, and we really had bad luck. We had a leadership with a very limited vision that did not raise citizen's will in the right way. There is a disappointment, but I am optimistic about Kosovo, and that is it ... [only] for two things: women have started to be a factor and to be more present in the public [life], and secondly, Albanians are a factor in the Balkans. And fortunately Albanians are a factor for the first time to stabilize the situation, Albanians are a factor for peace. So this is that part of my dream that was fulfilled. There are also other parts that I expect to be fulfilled. (Smiles)

Mimoza Paçuku: Do you consider yourself a feminist?

Vjosa Dobruna: Yes {nods}, I consider myself a feminist, but without going into the definition of feminism. I do not want to make it difficult as an academic session. I believe I am a feminist and I feel good in my own skin as a woman. I believe that I do not have any limits regarding what I want to do as a woman. I personally do not have any limits just because I am a woman. I never doubt that just as a woman I do not have the right to do something, because men have the right to do everything. So I feel good in my own skin. I expect also from other women to feel good in their own skin. This is feminism! Also, when something is denied because they are women, I expect for them to fight. We do not have to wait for others. On the contrary, we have to take our own responsibilities. In this context, I am a feminist. I am not a feminist in the context that women are against men. I am not against men, I am not. I believe in equality.

I also believe that women, especially feminists should help men, since the development of women is the development of society. Society cannot be developed if only a part of it is developed, men should be developed. Men are born and raised by women, that is why mothers and the society have to help them. Others have to help them develop as well. So, my feminism is liberal, is postmodern, it is not a

radical feminism of the '70s, '80s, and '90s. I believe that Kosovo has enough feminists, women feminists, as well as men feminists. I believe there is space to develop more. I believe a feminist movement exists and I am not part of that movement which is quite institutionalized. When I say institutionalized I do not think of it as a structure of different women's organizations, but other organizations and interest groups of civil society as well, who present and promote the same interests. There is a movement, and it is not perfect. Why it is not perfect? It is more difficult, [knowing] the stages we have gone through, to have equality as a priority.

Earlier in the interview I told you what happened in 1995, when we promoted and advocated for women's rights against domestic violence, how our society and political parties reacted at that time. This situation was before the war and now it is the same. Women's priority, I am talking about women in general, was to restart their life, create something and then have a public life and be in public. They did not think that their presence in public life would help to restart their life. Yes, they would have a better start. These are all those variations. Not all women are the same, women are different and have different priorities. Therefore based on this, the movement is much bigger than it is presented. Every group or interest group of women which promotes a certain field or an interest that brings that woman to an equal position is a feminist organization and group, whether it is called that or not.

Many women in Kosovo hesitate to call themselves feminists because a stigma exists. And this stigma is that feminists are against men. But feminists are not against men, they are [feminists] for themselves. They see their gender and skin as natural, and they do not want to become men. This is the feminism I believe that has the theoretical base I would not elaborate here. It is more difficult than in other places, but it is possible and you can say so, I say it publicly every time I am asked, also in [TV] shows, I say, "Yes, I am a feminist." I elaborate it this way, it depends on how the journalist puts the question, but basically this is it. Basically, with very simple words, I am a woman and feel good in my own skin. And I fight for all women to have the same opportunities and feel good in their own skin or their own gender. This is the feminism I accept. What else...

Mimoza Paçuku: What do you consider your greatest accomplishments in life so far?

Vjosa Dobruna: I'm not yet of that certain age when I can look back and appreciate or write an autobiography. I would not know what to say what an accomplishment is. It is what they say, naturally. I do not know. I am a person who lives to work, a person who does not see it as an obligation, but rather as part of me, part of my culture, part of how I was raised by Hydajet and Musa, Qazim Aga, my grandfather, as well as my uncles, and my sisters who are part of a culture where helping others comes naturally. I do not take it as an obligation, I take it as part of me. I do not know whether I can see this as an accomplishment, or as religion, but for me is an education that comes naturally. I do not know if this is an accomplishment or what is it, but this is who I am. Maybe after some years, when I have to fill forms and look back, maybe there would be something I would like to have done, and something I would not like, not at all. But something I will always do for sure... articulate publicly and privately what I believe in and how I will try to achieve it, if I need to mention the word, I will also fight. I cannot find a vocabulary, a more adequate word: I will advocate.

Mimoza Paçuku: Can you tell me what your dreams are for the future?

Vjosa Dobruna: I said, “Tell your dreams to God, make him laugh” (Laughs). I like to live what I dream, to live in a society that has a vision and a society where people feel good and equal. And there are no personal or group limits, despite legal limits, but of course to live in a state that makes possible all of these. Then when you have that, each individual has the opportunity to accomplish their dreams. You cannot ask me what my dream is. My dream cannot be realized in an environment where the dreams of the majority are unpredictable. Therefore, I do not know how to answer this question. Unless I dream in this kind of state, and then everyone’s dreams can be realized (smiles).