

Oral History Kosovo

“WITH MY COUNTRY IN THE BACKGROUND”

“**With my Country in the Background**” is a book with photographs curated by film director Kaltrina Krasniqi and visual artist Alban Muja in 2011/2012. Aspiring to move away from the exotic portrait of Kosovo which is usually produced by quick journalism and enthusiastic tourists, the curators decided to share 100 photographic cameras with young photographers (age 14-24) to be used in the whole of Kosovo. The youths had only 30 shots to reveal what concerned them, thus their “self-meditation” resulted in a very rich and full content beyond the display of the usual representation of the deep connection to religion, tradition, war and poverty. The photographs of these youths show Kosovo’s life as it was gradually being regenerated and as it was searching for itself in this new political and social context.

Going through the selected photographs with curiosity, we decided to reach back to the work done two years ago and talk to one of the participants in this book, Lirika Demiri, a young woman from Ferizaj, a Sociology student at the University of Pristina who starts the conversation by saying how sociology attracted her because of “the way the private interacts with the public, the social with the individual.” After she enrolled in the university, she focused her studies on culture and gender, and photography was the tool through which she observes and shows her subjects.

OHI: How did you get involved in the photographic book, *With my Country in the Background*?

Lirika Demiri: It was by coincidence; an NGO was looking for young activists in Ferizaj, who would narrate their story about the place they live in through photographic cameras. It happened one of them to be me.

OHI: How did you decide about the topic you would present?

Lirika Demiri: This question pushed me to search in the pile of notebooks which I’ve saved from high school. In the last pages of one of them, in the middle of some math scribbles, I found all the topics that concerned me at that time and that I wanted to take pictures of: Tika/the dog in my neighborhood, the train/railway, children’s work, the village Dubrava/life in the RAE¹ community, the library... So, picking the subject was part of an inside search process, an artistic curiosity through which I started to see my city from the perspective of a new photographer.

Now that I think of it, deciding for Dubrava village and the lifestyle of the RAE community was very intuitive, in the sense that I didn’t know what I could find there. But I knew what I didn’t want to take

¹ Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian Community

photos of, and it was the Ferizaj that everyone knows, that Ferizaj with the mural of a waiter, with the church and the mosque in the same yard, and the bifurcation which was waterless most of the time. Dubrava attracted me because I would confront poverty, improvised houses, lack of education, the smiles despite the crooked teeth and the bare feet. Through photography I wanted to challenge everyone with the spectrum of social marginalization.

OHI: Was the access to the RAE community difficult?

Lirika Demiri: On the contrary, the RAE community welcomes you with joy and enthusiasm. The happiest were the children, some of them were never photographed before. It was a big deal for them, but also for me. I could feel the weight of documenting their happiness, despite the tough circumstances they were living in. I felt I wouldn't be able to do a lot for them. The elders of the neighborhood knew this, they were used to curious visitors who were coming and going with their pockets full of promises.

OHI: What has this experience given to you?

Lirika Demiri: When you have a camera with which you can't take more than 30 photographs, a pre-calculation is imposed on you regarding the moments and the subjects, even if you didn't want it. I was long time before when I used for the last time a photographic camera, that's why *With my Country in the Background* gave back to me the anxiety that you get when you see the photos changing in the small white box. In those moments, you become more demanding and strict towards the protagonist and yourself.

It's strange, in Dubrava I was surrounded by a crowd of children who wanted to be photographed, they were showing their best features to me. And I, as a photography brat, was looking for the most expressive and photogenic between them. When the book was published, I saw the selected photos, and they were the most spontaneous ones, the most unplanned ones. I learnt that often you need to take photos for the sake of your protagonist, even if this means that you sort of need to give up your personal artistic taste.

OHI: Do you still take photos today, if so, what interests you?

Lirika Demiri: I don't have one of those big lenses, and days go by that I don't take a photo. But I see photography every day; I see it in the buses' doors that open and close boringly, in the steps of an elder who struggles while passing, in the boredom of an employee who is turning the kebabs on the grill decorated with overcooked vegetables – decorated just like horse's hair -, in the determination of a hairdresser who's trying to straighten a stubborn curl, in the blocs of the capital city's flowerless buildings, in the irony of the windows through which light never passes, and in the enthusiasm of vendors.

I've noticed that through photography I can understand sociology better, I can visualize it. I'm intrigued by the cold unfinished phantom buildings and the deserted places, it says a lot about what it could have been, but simultaneously it is a symbol of quitting, of giving up. I often take photos with no certain concept, just for the sake of the composition of colors and shapes, and sometimes I can't "freeze" the picture that I see. The untaken pictures seem to me as faded dreams, as lost illusions. And those are exactly what encourage me to hear that "click" oncemore.