

## INTERVIEW WITH SHQIPE MALUSHI

Pristina and Peja | Date: June 2 and October 13, 2013

Duration: 129 minutes

Present:

1. Shqipe Malushi (Speaker)
2. Donjeta Berisha (Camera/Interviewer)
3. Igballe (Igo) Rogova (Interviewer)
4. Nicole Farnsworth (Interviewer)
5. Kaltrina Krasniqi (Camera)
6. Jung Chao (Camera)
7. Anna Di Lellio

*Symbols used about the comments in the transcript to support non-verbal communication*

() – Emotional communication

{ } – The interviewee explains through gestures

*Other symbols in the transcript:*

[] – Additional symbol in the text to ease the understanding

*Footnotes are editorial additions to give information about place, names and expressions.*

*[The transcript reflects the conversation with no edits, thus it does not correspond with the video which is edited in chapters.]*

**Nicole Farnsworth:** Tell us about your childhood.

**Shqipe Malushi:** My childhood was very sad, because when I was three years old my father died. He was the first Albanian pharmacist in Kosovo, and left my 24 year-old mother widowed. Our house was a house of activists, it was a house with a heritage, starting from my great grandfather Haxhi Zeka and all the way to my grandfather, they were all for freedom and the liberation of Kosovo, meaning the nation. It was a heavy death for us, especially for my grandmother, this was very deep pain. For me also it was huge pain because I was the eldest child and my father loved me. They told me that I don't have a memory of my father, and once I realized that, when I felt a deep pain, I decided in my childhood to become a happy child and created a life of entertainment in all circumstances, I mean, I became a clown wanting to make everyone laugh and remove their pain. And when I grew up, I began to go through my neighborhood, little by little, house by house where there was a lot of pain and I made everyone laugh, and made them happy.

From an early age my intention was to bring happiness where there is pain, and that continues to follow me until now. But as a child, I grew up in a very traditional, very conservative family, in a family with many rules. My grandma was a queen, at least that's how everyone considered her in Peja, she was among the first women who went to Tirana to the Nuns Monastery, to learn how to read and write and become educated. She was educated at that time, one of the first women who brought fashion to Peja, she went out dressed up with hats, wore beautiful things from Greece, Turkey, and was a modern woman, and very very smart.

Since I resembled my father, she, my grandmother, deeply bonded with me and I slept with her, so she decided to make me a human being, I mean, she said to me, "I have to prepare you, to make you a human being, you must be a human being." I didn't understand what she meant by, "a human being," I mean, I was already a human being, with two legs, I already existed as a human being. "No, you are not a human being without becoming one, without serving your country, without serving your nation, without serving your people." Therefore she worked a lot with me, trying to teach me every subject, every aspect, how to think, how to act, how to behave with people. As a child I was very curious, I had much curiosity, I asked many questions about everything, sometimes I asked the wrong questions at a time when there were so many rules, especially when a girl asked so many questions, especially the wrong questions. So when I asked the wrong questions, my grandmother squeezed my lips, "This wasn't the place to ask this type of questions."

And sometimes she beat me, it is of course understandable, I was a very rebellious girl. For example, once we went out to play, I played a lot with boys, and in my neighborhood there were more boys and the girls were very passive. And I was the leader of all the children there, boys and girls, because I always took action, and one day we went to steal plums. So we went to steal plums, we used to place them inside our

shirt, and our friend Nazlija, poor thing she suffered badly, she went to my grandmother and told her, “Your granddaughter is stealing plums in my garden.” Naturally my grandmother beat me to death, beat me, beat me, because I made her lose face. So I went and got an ax, because I wanted to cut Nazlija’s head because she betrayed us and went to her door, naturally her mother came out, I was only seven years-old, but from the beginning my Albanian blood wanted me to cut someone’s head. And when her mother came out and grabbed the ax, she took my ax and again went to my grandmother and said, “Your girl wanted to cut the head of my daughter.” So my grandmother again whipped my legs with a rope, turned me into a zebra, and I couldn’t get up from bed for seven days because of that whipping, but Nazlija’s mom never returned our ax. I mean, fairness was important for me, she didn’t return the ax. I stole her plums, she stole my ax, so the truth about the ax never came out. I got beaten, Nazlija spied and all this remained as a memory. I feel sorry for Nazlija today, she is in a mental hospital and all her family died. Two days ago I wanted to visit her, but we had a couple of deaths in the family and I didn’t get a chance [to visit her], but I will go to visit Nazlija another time, when I come back in July, I owe it to her. This is a burden of memory, I owe her at least one meeting, because she has no one to protect her, at least to see if I can find a connection with her soul, to see if I can bring back memories, so I can help her, if I can, if she is in a state that can be helped. But I never forgot Nazlija, although this was just something among kids.

Another memory that is very dear to me is the memory of the cemetery. As kids we played in the cemetery, we called it “the little cemetery,” right here where the park is. Because I felt very close to death, because of my father, I couldn’t ever accept that death took my father away, so death and I fought to reveal that there was no death, there had to be life after death. All the dead for me were soldiers, Turkish soldiers were buried in this cemetery since the time of the Turkish occupations. And one day they decided to make a park and destroy the cemetery, and that for me was horrifying, because in my grandmother stories all these soldiers were buried in this cemetery, so now the cemetery would be destroyed, and I would be destroyed too, my whole world of beliefs that there was life beyond would be destroyed if they removed those bones. So I organized the kids to save these dead soldiers, and when the cranes came to destroy the graves, I brought all the children and we had plastic bags, so we gathered bones and we tried to put together the bodies from the bones, somewhere we found a hand, somewhere two arms, then we found a head and we put together a body, and put it in plastic bags, one by one. We wanted to make people, save the soldiers so the crane would not eat them up. In the meantime someone went to my grandmother and told her, “The children can be infected, they are touching the bones and they can get some illness,” so the parents gathered and occupied our project, they picked us up and beat us all of us who were there, they really beat us hard. I was very small, very thin, with big ears. This happened and it is a childhood memory. I mean, since I was a kid I always had the desire to save the memory of life, to keep even those who were dead alive, and I fought for this.

I was very restless, I was ahead of my time and did not follow the rules, so they had problems with me as a kid, I don’t blame them. My family was one of the most traditional families in Peja, they were very good, and very smart. On the mother’s side, see all the pictures here, my grandfather was governor of Gjakova, a revolutionary, or on the opposite side. They were all the greatest patriots, they were part of the government and they fought. A child such as I was, I risked their reputation, with all the stupid things I did as a child. They wanted me to act like a soldier, not like a child, but I acted like a child.

I played with boys all the time, I was tougher than all the boys, because all the girls were really like girls, I was more like a boy, I feared nothing. We had a lot of adventures. For example, a few nights ago I was interviewed at Portat e Nates, and during the interview a friend of mine called and said, “We all were afraid of Shqipe, because Shqipe was never afraid of anything except her uncle.” When he showed up, he

was a big man, and very scary when he raised his voice, my whole body trembled from fear because when he hit me like this, I would fly I only had beatings, couldn't do it otherwise, they couldn't control me, but with beatings they kept me under control a bit.

I had a lot of big dreams, I wanted to go away beyond these mountains of Rugova, because nothing ever happened here in Peja. People gave birth, they were happy when a boy was born, and they were silent when a girl was born, girls got married, boys got married, babies were born, people died, that's was all. The circus came to town once a year. The circus came from somewhere, I don't know from where, I always wanted to perform in the circus. The circus was filled with.... So I used to peek inside the circus and went to see the trapeze, all the women who performed there, I had the dream to perform in the circus because there was no other place where you could play. So one day I saw a beautiful boy in the circus, so I went and entered his cabin. He was painting his face into a clown face, I stood behind him, so when he turned his head, I grabbed his head and kissed him. This was my first kiss at 15 years-old, with that circus man. When I ran out I fell, he kicked me out, "Go, go because you are too small," but whatever, it was my first kiss. He kicked me out of there, from his cabin and I fell, and his dog jumped and bit my leg, and I bled (laughs), I bled a lot, and when I came home my grandmother, the "general of the dead army," my grandma was like a general (laughs), she started beating me. "What happened to your leg?" "A dog bit me" "Where did the dog bite you?" "At the circus" "Why did you go to the circus? I will show you now, you will never become a human being, you will never become a human being." So she grabbed me, boom, boom, {shows how she was beaten}. I am screaming. She said, "I didn't hit you yet, why are you screaming?" I was calling the neighbours, "Help, come and help me, grandmother is killing me. If I only survive one more time!" Like this...

My first dream started to come true with the first television screen. I was only seven years old when we bought a television, we were the only ones in the neighborhood who had television, and so all the kids gathered to watch TV, and so Micky Mouse comes on TV. We all fell in love with Mickey Mouse, Oh mother! This Mickey Mouse, had a beautiful name and moved. So I decided that life on TV was very beautiful, and I had to enter television because you couldn't live this sad life only with beatings. How could live a life like that? I tried to enter the television, couldn't enter the television, try this way, that way, try to open it, couldn't get inside the television. Then I took a cardboard box, I cut it in the front, and made it like a television screen and put it over my head and went out to the streets of Peja. "Good Day, these are latest news that you will hear today," I said, I mean, like this. People again said, "This Malushi girl lost her mind" (laughs), they again went to grandma, again beating. "Where are you going with this box to dishonor me?" But I walked with the box over my head through Peja. I did this.

I was too much... I had a photographic memory and could remember many things, I mean, I didn't have to study a lot. I would look at the lessons once, and would memorize them, and I knew all my lessons. It was very interesting how I used to learn my lessons at a glance. I had all Fives [top grades] in school, but I was bored because school was very boring. Teachers were very boring, and students too were even more boring, because they would just sit {makes a stiff posture}, they didn't move. I had to do something interesting to entertain myself. So I would cut classes jumping out the windows. We had a friend, Kimete, she was simply perfect as a child. Even her hair was perfect, and her dress was perfect. Kimete liked to eat very much. She always brought her breakfast with her in the classroom, and she put her hand into the desk drawer during the class, and she ate. I also loved to eat, but she would never give me a bite, she wouldn't share it with me. One day I found a dead mouse, so I wrapped the dead mouse, naturally I stole Kimete's breakfast, and left the wrapped mouse [in the drawer] (laughs). So she put her hand, she touched it, it was soft, when she saw it was a dead mouse she passed out. Do you know how the teacher grabbed me? (laughs) He grabbed me from the collar, and my legs were moving in the air {imitates with

fingers how she walked in the air}, he didn't let me walk, he grabbed me and threw me out the door. I was a little monster, because the conditions were very boring, I had no other choice but to entertain myself. We did these things in Peja.

While I was growing up everything was a difficult discovery (laughs), because no one prepared me for anything, no one gave an explanation of the biological process, what happens to a girl who is growing up. When I was born my father expected a boy, but I was born a girl and a very tiny one, they told me that when I was born I looked like a little cat, this small {shows the size with her hand}, plus I had big ears. So my father took scotch tape and taped my ears to straighten them while I was in the cradle, because he wanted to beautify me, but he couldn't make me beautiful under any circumstances. They tried very hard, but I wouldn't eat, I cried a lot. Even as a child I had an aversion, Oh my God, what was waiting for me in life! When I grew up, the neighborhood children called me garlic-head, definitely garlic-head. So I grew up with these complexes like a garlic-head, but this garlic head was very smart, smarter than all the onion-heads around me.

Very good...So one day I was in Rugova, I was ten years old, then we went to Rugova for summer vacations, staying there three months at a time, I used to ride horses with the little mountainers. I had my good friend Zeka, he was fantastic, so Zeka and I were big devils. We usually woke up early and we jumped on horses in our pajamas, and rode them bare back. My grandfather almost had a heart attack and said, "If you fall off the horse, you won't survive." I rode horses very well. We also used to catch snakes, we used to kill snakes and then we scared grandmother and my aunt with them, whoever was there. We'd throw a dead snake at them to see what their reactions would be.

Once we milked a female donkey, then we took the grey milk and fed the calf. We always experimented to see what would happen, and naturally nothing ever happened. Another time, I got a rabbit, I wanted to train the rabbit to walk like a dog, I tied a rope around the rabbit's neck, but the rabbit was a rabbit, wanted to run away, didn't want to walk like a dog. I loved that rabbit very much, so I took it and put it in a chicken coop, to save it, so I could play with it the next day. This was in Rugova, and of course my grandmother comes in, because my grandmother is the main character of my life, I adore her and keep her alive till today. So my grandmother says, "Where is the rabbit?" "I put it in the chicken coop," I answered. "How can you put it in the chicken coop, you know that chicken lice will eat the rabbit?" "Aaaa...I will kill the lice." I went to get the shoe spray and sprayed the rabbit...wow, wow, wow...a fly spray too, I sprayed the rabbit, naturally the rabbit licked itself and died. So painful! The burial of the rabbit was phenomenal, I put it in a shoe box and we buried the rabbit and made him a grave, I cried and shed a lot of tears for the rabbit, I suffered because I killed him myself, without knowing that the spray was poison. Anyway, in the evening, the village dogs dug the grave and ate the dead rabbit. Wow, what a dear, this was a confrontation with the ruthlessness of life and death...Imagine finding pieces of the dead rabbit, they torn him apart, piece by piece. The fear of the brutality of life was very great.

I was only ten years old when I was in the forest playing with Zeka and then suddenly blood was flowing between my legs, I was terrified. "What is all this blood?" I didn't know what it was. I went to my grandmother, "Oh grandmother, I am hurting, I am bleeding," I said. "Don't worry, it's nothing, it will pass," she said. But the blood didn't stop, so I gathered leaves; not knowing how to stop the bleeding, I used the leaves. I didn't stay home and kept wandering around the forest trying to stop my bleeding, but what was worst is that I didn't know what it was. Then when I went home, I saw my aunts making halwah [a sweet for special occasions], because now I had become a woman. Oh my God, I started to weep. What woman? I? "Now you have become a woman, and you can't play with Zeka," they said. "Why can't I play with Zeka?" I asked. "Because now you have become a woman and you can't play with Zeka," they continued.

“I am only ten, I have to play...” The transition from childhood to womanhood was tragic for me. I didn’t know what it meant to become a woman. So that passed somehow, it passed, and I survived that transition when I was only ten.

Then school began, they started to forbid me this and that, no more playing with boys, no more climbing on trees, no more jumping over graves, no more anything. I was allowed only to play with some smart girls, so it became a complete limitation. I couldn’t play with those other stupid girls, my grandmother used to say, “You can’t play with stupid girls because you can’t learn anything from stupid girls,” grandma said. So you start counting, this one is stupid, that one is stupid, no one was left to play with. “What about me?” I said to her. “You! We have to make you into a human being. You don’t need friends because we have to make you into a human being.” So this was the process of becoming a human being. I got really fed up.

When I turned 14, I decided to make a revolution, I needed a complete reaction to this, I had to show them something, I had to teach my family something, because they just simply wouldn’t understand. I decided I had to run away from home. I read somewhere in a magazine, because I read a lot then, I read, “Tom Jones is helping talented orphans.” And I considered myself an orphan because I didn’t have a father, my mother didn’t figure anywhere, she simply remained very sensitive, therefore I was an orphan based on my knowledge and I was very talented I thought, because I painted, danced, wrote poetry, whatever you wanted, I did. I was a big deal Ms. Thing.

So I decided to go to Tom Jones, but how to go to Tom Jones? The plan: the first plan was to steal my mother’s passport, the second plan to steal grandfather’s money because they had a lot of money, we were the children of a rich man. I used to call my grandfather father, he saved his money in a trunk in the attic. He was a businessman and had a lot of money. They kept the money in the trunks then. So I began, “Mother, we have to draw a Roman passport and compare it to the new passports for homework, do you have a passport, mother?” “I have it, honey” “Can you give it to me because I need it?” “Yes, here is the passport.” I take my mother’s passport, I start drawing and pretending to do my homework, and watch where she puts it back between the books. Aha, I found it! I take the passport and go to the attic and open grandfather’s box, and take five thousand Deutsch Marks, in the 70s you could buy a house with that money. With five thousand Deutsch Marks you could really buy a house or an apartment. So I filled my school bag with those five thousand Deutsch Marks, and I call a friend and told him, “Find me a taxi that can bring me out of the country.” The plan was all ready, we had to go to see a movie with the whole school that day. The whole school had planned to go see the movie so I pretended that I was going to see that movie. They knew I would come home late.

But in the morning, instead than going to school, I took a taxi, I paid {counts} his money. I filled the taxi with fruits and vegetables, because I knew that when we passes into Bulgaria, because they were very poor, they would not look at me but at the fruits and vegetables...I saw a lot of movies, brother, I saw a lot of movies. So they took the fruits and vegetables. I placed a pillow here {points to her stomach} under my black school uniform which we wore everyday. I placed the pillow so I would look pregnant. I placed a scarf on my head to look like my mother’s picture in the passport and we got moving. We arrived at the border just a few minutes before midnight. When we arrived, we waited for the guard change, you know they change shifts. So five minutes before they changed, seeing them tired and that new guard wasn’t coming yet, we moved forward with the car. They are looking at me, a pregnant Muslim, a young girl. They didn’t pay attention, I swear to God, they looked at the passport and I passed. When we came to the Bulgarian border, they opened the trunk and took all the fruit and vegetables, they confiscated all of it

and didn't pay attention to me. When we came to the Turkish border, I took out the pillow and left it in the car, of course I wore a mini skirt up to here {shows the length}, when they saw my legs they too didn't look at me, whether I was a mother or not a mother, we passed.

We arrived in Istanbul. Oh Mother! Istanbul. It was the Hotel Kent, a five star hotel. I went to the Hotel Kent, the first thing I did was to buy a black leather hat, I became very cool, you know. It was a hippie then, so I started to look into how I could go to London. Try this way, that way...moved around with Americans, with others, this one, that one. I managed to go to a concert with Zeki Muren, then Zeki Muren was a star. I gave him a red rose and he kissed my hand. This for me was a great story, Zeki Muren kissed my hand. Otherwise nothing, I was a child buying lollipops, candies, walking through the streets, wandering with the hippies, just doing nothing.

Here at home it was the end of the world, they discovered at last that I had run away from home, this was a huge disaster for my family. I didn't run away to get married, this was very positive, because all the girls who ran away did it to get married. But I didn't run away to get married, I went out of the country. This was a very big thing. What to do now, it became a day of death, my grandmother opened the door {a funeral rite to welcome people for condolences}. "I want you to bring me a piece of her alive or dead, because I can't live without her. I want to know her grave." So the Interpol went after me and looked for me throughout Europe. They discovered that I was in Turkey, and the Interpol came to Turkey, my mother and uncle came to Turkey three times but I escaped. I moved fast and escaped. At the end, the friend who arranged my taxi came to Turkey. He said to me, "Do you want to go to London?" "Yes, of course" I said. "We have to rob a store," he said. "No problem," I said. I was supposed to go to the store and seduce the owner, while he would break the cash register and take the money out. I also had finished all my money after such spending of course, at the end I finished it all. "Let's go rob that money together, and there is a boat we can pay with that money and go to London." No problem.

I am supposed to seduce the old man, to be sexy or something like that, you know... So I got ready to go and become Mata Hari, but the police came. He had betrayed me. Ferid betrayed me, the police had found Ferid, they found the taxi driver and he told them which hotel he had dropped me in, so at the end, it was a betrayal. Just when I got ready thinking of how we were going to attack [the store], the police showed up and told me, "Excuse me do you recognize this girl?" showing me a picture. "Is this your daughter?" I said, I am looking at myself [in the picture] and saying in Turkish, "Your daughter?" "No, no" he says, "this is not my daughter, this is you." "No, no this is not me." {She says this in Turkish}. He pulls out my mother's photo and shows it to me, I look at my mother. Ah God, why do you have to confront me with reality! "Your wife is beautiful" I said. "No," he said, "This is your mother." "No, it is not my mother." "OK" he said, "Who is your father?" "He is here, somewhere," I just mentioned some name. "My father dropped me here to eat breakfast. "Turkish fathers don't bring their daughters to an hotel to eat breakfast," he said. "So let see who you are."

So he took me, and I wanted to run away from him, but they caught me like a mouse, they had all come with cars, there were a hundred policemen there. They took me and pushed me inside the police car, I ran away from them three times, and then they brought me to the Embassy of Yugoslavia, of Former Yugoslavia, at that time there was a very smart ambassador. "Girl, you are only 14 years-old, we have to return you home," he said. "I can't go back home, they will kill me, I can't go back home." "We'll send you by plane to Belgrade." "I will jump off the plane, you put me on the plane and I'll jump off the plane." The ambassador got scared, "Otherwise I can't keep you here, you are dangerous, if I keep you here, you will run away again, and if you run away again we will not be able to find you."



So they sent me straight to jail. It was the end of Ramadan and the beginning of Bajram. [Eid]. They took me and put me in jail, in a small cell. Across me there were men, I had to stand up all the time. There was a half wall, I ripped my coat off, I tied it to my boots, and threw it on the other side of the wall, then I climbed and got out on the other side, but on the other side a policeman was waiting for me and he grabbed my arm and brought me inside the cell again.

The second time I ran away from jail, they brought in an old lady, and because I acted as a child, hitting the walls, screaming, I thought maybe this would work out, they would think that I was mad and bring in the psychiatrists, then they would send me to the mental hospital and I would run away. Yes, yes, all my plans were like in the movies, I had them all ready. So they brought a woman, and I said, "Can I accompany her to the ladies room?" They said, "Go to the ladies room." I brought her to the ladies room and ran away. But just before I got out, a general was coming in, and he grabbed me by the hair and pulled me all the way without letting me walk and returned me again to the cell. I wasn't saved. Next they brought some prostitutes, they used to touch me, pull my ears, I had to fight, one evening they brought about ten of them. I was tiny like this. [Takes a defense position], "Don't touch me" I said, and they laughed at me. They were all made up, like pictures from hell.

One young policeman fell in love with me over there, he really fell. He used to bring me food, because in Turkey if you don't have money to pay for food, there is no food. This was a transitional jail, so that young man brought me food, or he shared his food with me, and he wrote to me for ten years in a row. He was very nice, cute. Whatever, at that time I wasn't much interested in relationships. So, my mother came with my uncle to take me back, the end of the world, the day of judgement came. When they arrived they said to me, "Listen, you have two choices, you have to appear in front of the court, we have a woman who is looking to adopt. If you want you can go with that woman, if not, then with your mother." They placed my mother and that blonde woman dressed up with a maroon color suit, I remember this, she had a white collar, I remember that, she was very beautiful. Ah, what a beauty! To go with that woman would have been a fantasy, I was looking at her. They said, "This woman wants to adopt you, this other woman is your mother." I can't accept my mother, no, she is not my mother. My mother dressed in black, with a black scarf, she was tiny, crying, crying, "Why oh mother, did you have to do these terrible thing?" I looked at her, Oh my God, how can I go home with my mother, no brother, I can't. Honestly I could have lived with this other woman who looked like a princess, but I can't live with her, I don't know Turkish well. So I decided let's go with my own mother. So my mother and my uncle, the minute I walked out from the courtroom, they tied me with a rope just like this [shows how she was tied]. Then they brought me to a relative, they put me in a room without windows and locked the door and placed tables and chairs behind the door. My mother slept by the wall. "Mother, the place is too small." "It's ok honey, it's better this way." "Why this way? I could sleep that way." "No," she said, "I will sleep this way because I missed you." What missing me? She just didn't want to let me move. The whole family was staring at me. Finally we came to Peja, when we passed the border of Former Yugoslavia on the way to Peja, that officer that I tricked came out and gave me a very hard slap across my face. "You want to run away?" [she says it in Serbian]. His slap turned my head 260 degrees.

Violence was a daily occurrence for me. So we passed and arrived in Peja. When we arrived in Peja I thought they would kill me, but no one reacted. They brought the imam to recite some prayers over my head, and they said that Satan had possessed me. So I said, "All right, let it be, Satan has possessed me, whatever." While he prayed over my head no one talked. The punishment was sad, it was silence. The whole town had a meeting and they decided to totally ignore me, and I turned into a shadow when I was only 15 years old, not 15, only 14 years old. Can you imagine? I used to walk through the town, and women would look through the windows, and yap, yap, yap, they used to talk among each other, but no



one talked to me, not at home, not at school, no teachers, no students. This was very sad, I could cry now (she cries). The total punishment lasted six months, and one day I was coming back from school and I saw my uncle placing iron bars on the windows. "What are you doing with these iron bars," I asked him. "Protection from thieves." "But we don't have thieves." He said, "Thieves." They locked me up, removed me from school, and locked me in that room for a year. No school, no books, they cut my hair. It was I and my whole world, I had a beautiful world inside my head. I read some of the things I had written before, I used to talk with these people from another planets, I had no one to talk to, the walls. I used to imagine that they would come and tell me, "What is you wish? We are at your service." And I would say, "Can you please eat my family so they can all disappear?" (laughs). This is what begin a rebellious and revolutionary child means.

I stayed in house arrest for one full year and my imagination developed then. I would lean out the window to watch my girlfriends return from school. I used to make gestures so I could make them laugh. I never gave up. When I turned 16, because on my 15 birthday I was locked up, I decided to kill myself, so I took all my grandfather's pills. Since I was very active, the house became very quiet. They saw that something was not right, this girl doesn't hit the walls or the doors. What happened? They opened the door, they found me half dead, they brought me to the hospital and saved my life. I was saved!

There was a Serbian psychiatrist who said to my family, "This child wants freedom, if you don't give her freedom, she will try suicide again, you must let her go back to school. If you don't let her go to school, I can't guarantee she will live." Then they decided to let me go back to school escorted by a servant. The servant carried my bag, supposedly she carried my bag, they just followed me like that. We had two servants, they came to school to wait for me. Today rich people's kids do that, but before we didn't need protection. However, I had all Fives and graduated when I was 17 years old.

Later they let me go to study, to study pharmacy in Belgrade. I went to study pharmacy but I hated pharmacy, how can a poet become a pharmacist for God's sake, it's not possible. I went to Belgrade and that was my farewell to my family. There, a big change happened inside my heart, what I wanted as a child was love, protection and freedom. Now these young women have everything, but I didn't have it then, and my family didn't understand that I wanted those very things because I asked for what I wanted in a rebellious manner. I didn't know how to ask for love, and they didn't know how to give it me.

I left my family and from this moment on I started searching for my family. All my life I looked for my family in other people. I looked for my mother in my friends' mothers, I searched for my father in my friends' fathers, I searched for my uncle, I searched for my whole family to save them. This was the treasure of my life: searching. I searched in Belgrade and I searched in the world, and now that I found them, I came back to them, but they are not here, they are all dead, and now I want to keep their memory alive. I am trying to save the children. Do you know how I save those children? Because I want to bring them back, because they were right, they were dignified people. In my family there was only death for 50 years in a row, only death after death. They didn't have time or space to deal with a child who was curious beyond the mountains of Rugova, wanting to discover Rugova.

My life was a great adventure, without knowing that this gave pain to my family. Can you imagine? I am jumping a little bit, two years ago we had a celebration at home, a large circumcision party for our two little boys. This was the first celebration and happiness in our family in the last 50-60 years. I mean, no celebration, only death, death. This was planned to take place on July 19, and our aunt was very sick, so I kept telling my aunt, "Don't you dare die before July 19, because you will ruin our celebration." Because

something always ruins our celebrations. “So you can’t die.” Even if she wanted to die, she didn’t die. She survived and is still alive.

My escape from home made many parents think twice about their behavior towards their girls. After my gesture, two years later a ballet school for girls opened. The girls in the city were allowed to go to dance school. They were allowed to act and perform in plays. Naturally they never let me, but they allowed other girls and [allowed them] to wear stockings, I used to get beaten every time I wore stockings. So when I see girls nowadays, how they dress, I look at them with sadness, thinking if I only could live my life all over again, the freedom that the girls today have, to dress up the way they like, to walk how they like with those dresses... Once, in one of my interviews, I said, “We sacrificed for your freedom, don’t forget us, because the time we had cost us a lot.” I didn’t go to school for two days only because I wore stocking, I got a beating for wearing them. I couldn’t move, this happened too.

Well...In Belgrade I dropped out pharmacy after two years, I quit pharmacy. I studied psychology, then I quit psychology, I studied French for a year, then went to Belgium, then I came back. I quit French and at the end I found my place in the department of Albanian Studies and Literature, because I had the dream to tell my grandmother’s stories, I wanted to become a writer.

Belgrade gave me the most beautiful years of my life. During that period in former Yugoslavia [Albanian-Serbian] relationships were not so fueled. Let us not forget that my family was persecuted from the beginning, but I didn’t feel this persecution, because I didn’t have any ideology in my head, except freedom. I didn’t have political ideology, and I wasn’t interested in those things. As an artist I was always hungry to discover art and the human being whom my grandmother always wanted me to become. I always sought to become that. I always sought to raise my awareness beyond the limits of an ordinary human being, to become something much more than the ordinary human being that I was. It wasn’t enough for me to just eat, sleep, get married. I wanted much more.

The foundations of my knowledge began to be established in Belgrade, by which I mean that there I went to the theater, I discovered opera. I was fascinated by the opera, by the theater, by film, there were film festivals. I was part of the society of artists in Belgrade. In the theater I was a member of Perpjekja [The Struggle] society. I used to write for the newspaper Perpjekja. I was a member of the dancing group Perpjekja. We used to travel all over former Yugoslavia, I was a very good dancer and I had a passion for dancing. We were professional dancers through Perpjekja. I was also an actress in the theater Perpjekja. I contributed to all spheres of art as a student. I was also published in both languages, in Serbian and Albanian, it is there that I began to grow.

I didn’t have any problems as an Albanian because I was able to talk back to them. When Albanians were seen only as street cleaners, I was not a street cleaner, I was a child of rich parents. We rented an apartment, we had beautiful clothes, we studied, which meant we had very good material means, so we never felt like street cleaners. I didn’t identify with the street cleaners or with the bakers, and I was able to fight these concepts when they said that I was different. “All Albanians are one, but you are different,” they’d say. I used to argue them, “I am no different, we are one, we are Albanians, we are one, and we are all good. You are also street cleaners and bakers,” because they differentiated us and I used to argue with that. They would apologize, because I was able to confront them about their racism or discrimination on the same level. I never understood that until I went to America. When I went to America I understood the discrimination of African Americans, of the native Americans, and I understood that I too was discriminated. When I saw what happened to them I would say but we too have experienced this, this too

happened to us. So my patriotic awareness began in America, not in Kosovo, not in Serbia, it really began in America.

I lived a bohemian lifestyle in Belgrade. I used to go out every night with artists, I traveled and I enjoyed life. Studying took the back seat, I wasn't so interested in studying because it wasn't that attractive. I finished language and literature at the department of Albanian studies in Belgrade. On June 20, 1980, there was an opening in a student exchange to America, to go and learn the language and work for three months, and I took advantage of this because I wanted to go to Mickey Mouse.

All my life I fantasized to go to Hollywood and become an actress, so something like that happened and of course [I fantasized] entering television. While going there on the plane I made a pact with myself. What do you want to be in America? An actress...but you don't know the language that well, my accent was very strong, and my English wasn't that good, I only knew 50 words altogether. Be a painter? No, life was too poor for artists, you had to suffer before you emerged. Dancer? I had gained a few pounds, No, not possible. No actress, no dancer, no painter. No one could live off poetry, so no poetry either. All right, I will be a writer, maybe I will make it as a writer. So I decided this on the plane: to be a writer.

When I landed in New York, New York was magical. Tall buildings, lights throughout the night, I stayed in New York four days. I had in my pocket the 50 dollars that my grandmother had given me, I saved those, and I knew only 50 words of English, I arrived in New York with that. The first thing I bought was a tee-shirt and a watch with Mickey Mouse that cost 40 dollars at that time. So I spent almost all my money and I had only 10 dollars left. The bus ticket for upstate New York, the place where they sent us to work, the Seniors Resident Hotel, cost 20 dollars. I didn't have enough for the ticket, but I found 20 dollars in the street. God, I was so happy. They sent me to work to this seniors hotel for Hasidic Jews. So I bought the ticket and went upstate to work.

My first job was to fix the rooms, push people on their wheel chairs to the dining room to eat, and entertain old people. I worked there for four months. It was a fantastic experience, because I had no clue who the Jews were, I never saw them before, I never met them before. Since I was a Muslim, when I understood who the Jews were, I worried that maybe they would hate me. But they gave me much love, they gave me so much love, so much understanding, they taught me how to take my first steps in New York. For example, I didn't know, and when they gave me tips, I would say, "No, no, it's our tradition to help you and bring you to the room, I can't." Then the lady of the hotel told me, "Hey, you will be poor all your life. Why don't you take the tips?" "No, it's our tradition to help them and push them," I said. "Ok, take the tips and bring them to me," she said. So I started to take the tips and gave them to her. Like that, she saved two thousand dollars in tips for me. Because I, with my morals (laughs), my grandmother's tradition, all that didn't work. All of a sudden I started to use my grandma's tradition, I really used it.

Other life adventures begun in New York, I decided not to go back to Kosovo, I wanted to live. When I returned to New York from that village with four thousand dollars, I went straight to the Bronx to live, a place where all Albanians lived. I rented an empty apartment, the only thing I owned was an old typewriter. I decided to use those four thousand dollars to publish a newspaper and I called it *The Student Voice*. I started writing about Michelangelo, other philosophers, Gandhi, whatever, I wrote about many things that the Albanian community then didn't have a clue of, they weren't on that level, nor had they the desire to learn. But I wanted to teach them philosophy and I spent all my money, I printed the newspaper with hundred mistakes, and went door to door to sell it. This newspaper never made more than 20 dollars and I lost all my money. This newspaper only had a first edition and died after the first

edition with my own money too. I went on to become a waitress because I had to eat, but no problem. Like this, my adventures began in New York.

Fate brought me to a job where I had to take care of three children, whose mother had died. They were Jewish, and their father was a famous lawyer and they hired me. I started with my devilishness. For example, I had to go for the interview and I didn't have what to wear, except a pair of black worn out pants. How could I go to the interview with those pants? I wetted them so they could look black. I wore them wet. When I arrived for the interview they brought me to a room with white couches. Oh Mother!...How to sit on those couches with wet pants? I sat with wet pants, trying to play the role. They asked me, "Do you know how to cook?" "Yes," I said. "What do you cook?" "International food," I answered. "What kind of international food?" "Italian, Greek, Turkish." "What kind of Italian food, spaghetti?" they continued. "What kind of Turkish food? Musaka?" they said, and I repeated their words. "Ah! beautiful," they said. I spoke like that, I looked good during the interview. After five days, they called me and told me that I was hired.

I started to work. The house was very big, white couches, two dogs, one black and one white, three children, fantastic. I had no clue of how to cook, I had never cooked two eggs or anything else. But I was the first white person in their service, so they were very happy to hire me, because I was a white person and from Europe. The lawyer knew the history of Kosovo better than I. He had books about all the oppressions, so it was there that I learned the history of Kosovo, who killed who, about persecutions and suffering. I learned everything from this Jewish man, in his service. One day his wife told me, "Do you know why we hired you? We felt very sorry for you. The day you came for an interview, you must have been so afraid that you peed on our couch. We had to get the cleaners to clean the couch." I told her, "I didn't pee, I was wearing wet pants because I didn't have better pants for the interview." (laughs) Anyway, that was my first adventure, and the lawyer's children were very loving, the children of rich people. Because I grew up the same way, with wealth, I didn't have the feeling that I was lower than them. I had the feeling that I was high enough, and used to tell them my grandmother's stories. They loved me a lot and I loved them.

I used to call my grandmother on the phone to ask her how to make burgers, how to cook this and that. So I learned how to cook, while cooking for them, I really learned how to cook. I learned to cook my grandma's dishes little by little, how to make pita [pie], and they loved all the food I made for them. This was a family that I adored, it was like my family but without violence. They were sad because their mother had died, they were rich like my family, but they were sophisticated and talked around the tables about all sorts of issues. I mean, I transformed the pain that I had from my family, and I acted like a family member in that artificial family that fulfilled my need and my pain from the separation from my family. My fate was a bit sadder, that was my fate.

One day I went to school to learn Hebrew, the Hebrew language. I used to write very well, and I started writing poetry in Hebrew. During the day I worked with the children, at nights I went to learn Hebrew. One night, while I was crossing the street, a car hit me, and there was like a premonition, somehow I had the feeling that something was going to happen, while I was walking my legs stopped and the car hit me. I knew the car was going to hit me. I had the out of body experience of death before dying. My soul left my body before I was hit by the car, I experience that. I saw the whole planet, I saw the house where I was born, I saw the house where I was living, I saw my body and it seemed so small. I thought, "Oh, my God, I was locked in that body." Everything felt like eyes, without a body, totally free, there was no more limitation of the body. I saw how the car hit my body, how my body fell over the car, then went under the car and remained in a sitting position. A loud voice echoed saying, "Go back, go back! {in English} "I don't

want to go back,” I said. Then [I saw] a light, thin like hair. Was it imagination or wasn’t imagination, I don’t know, but I never forgot that feeling. Like a hair, it entered my body. Then I opened my eyes and a man was holding me. I grabbed his coat {grabs her own blouse} and said, “I believe in God, I believe in God.” {in English} Then he said, “Shut up woman, no one stops you, just shut up.” Then I passed out and went into coma for four hours. My left leg was destroyed, I lost 40 percent of my hearing, my spine was damaged, my lower back was in bad shape, I was paralyzed from the waist down. I stayed in the hospital for a year and a half.

I had many surgeries in the hospital. They straightened my leg somehow because it was frozen, bent. I laid on my back for a year and a half and was very bored in the hospital, I couldn’t accept my fate, and I turned into a lifeless body. From the waist up I looked beautiful and my friends would tell me that when they came to see me. I had long hair, I was young and beautiful. I used to laugh and tell jokes and they came to be entertained, and they stayed with me in the hospital. But I couldn’t move from the waist down. I joked a lot in the hospital, I used to press buttons, my luck was that hospitals in America were like hotels. I pressed the buttons and called nurses showing that my bed moved upwards, and I would say, “My legs moved.” “Please don’t play like this, we have hundred things to do, don’t call us,” they would say. “My legs moved, my legs moved.”

The doctor said that I wouldn’t be able to walk without support. I could make it to the wheel chair if my spine got better, and that would be a miracle. I used to say to the doctor, “You are wrong, God didn’t create me like this. I have to get up on my feet, I have a lot of work to do.” And after one year and a half I got up on the wheel chair, then using all my strength, I got up on my feet and made the first steps. I will never forget my first steps. It took me 45 minutes to make one step, only one step. My body wouldn’t move, tears were pouring and so was my sweat while I was hanging on the bars of physical therapy, I had to hold on, but I couldn’t take a step.

It took me six years to learn how to walk again, I walked again, I was tied with metal braces, from here {shows from the waist to the ankles} I had my legs from here to there, like this. I returned to the family that I had been working for, they accepted me like that. I went to school like that, the doors to the school opened up. When Joshua, the boy I took care of, grew up and got into Sarah Lawrence College, I went with him and his father to the college to help him settle in, and when I arrived to the college I fell in love with it. It was so beautiful, like in fairy tales, those stone buildings, so I sat down and started to cry and cry. The accident had not happened yet, this was my first year. So I went to help the boy, and while I was crying his father said to me, “Why are you crying?” “This school is not for me, I am poor, a servant.” Then he said, “You never know Malush, you never know.” He used to call me like that, “Malush.” I said to him, “Don’t joke with me, I don’t have money, I don’t have papers, I don’t even know English. This is just a dream. Look at your son.” Then I continued to cry.

That night God sent the father such a headache that he couldn’t lift his head up. Because there was a freshmen party to welcome the students, Joshua asked me, “Please come with me, everyone has a parent with them, please come with me.” I said, “Okay,” so I went with him, there were free food and drinks. I started to drink, and I got so drunk, I got wasted. I told them I knew how to play Mozart on the piano. What Mozart? I had never played piano in my life. I started playing the piano. Americans are so nice, they are kind, even when they see a stupid person they don’t interfere. So I am playing and saying, “This is Mozart, this is Mozart.” They nodded, “Very good, very good.” What Mozart? A professor saw me there, he was a writer, and he started talking to me. We spoke for five hours, his name was Allan Gurganus. I have no clue what I must have said. I was so drunk and wasted. I only remember when he said, “I love your mind, I want you in this school. Do you want to study?” “Yes,” I said, “I’d love to study, but I don’t have money.” “I will

get you a scholarship, I want you in this school, call me in three days," he said that night. He gave me his card, but on the third day I was hit by a car and everything was over.

A year and a half later, Allan Gurganus saw Joshua and asked him, "Where is that woman you brought to the party?" He said, "She had a car accident." "Ah, brother, can you bring her because she will lose her scholarship if she doesn't come in six months. Her scholarship is effective for two years, but if she doesn't come it will be lost." Then Joshua called me, "Please come, come, because Allan Gurganus wants to see you." I showed up tied up in braces and crutches. When he saw me like that, he started to cry, "What happened?" he asked. "A car hit me, this is what I have turned into," I said. "Will you come to school?" he continued. "Yes, I will come to school."

Well, where my life ended in one moment; it started again at that very moment. The school opened for me. Now I had to find a way to get to the school. It was my dream. The body no longer was important, really it wasn't important. How to go to this school? How to go to school? So I began to talk to the people who sent me every day to physical therapy, there was a church there, I had finished my job with the Jewish family. I began to hang out with Christians, there was a First Baptist Church, they came and volunteered to take me to the church, gave me food, and I learned the Bible. I learned all about Christ, I wanted to be like Christ, because Christ was the most beautiful element in my life. He was very beautiful, he was true love, I became friends with Christ. And I said, "I will become like Christ or there is no other way. It was Christ that healed me."

One day I was crying, and a man who drove me every day asked me, "What's the matter?" "Brother, I got a scholarship for college, but I still have to pay 1500 dollars, and I don't have that." And he gave me a 1500 dollars check as a Christmas gift. This happened. Now, I needed 10 dollars every day to get to school and pay for buses and trains from New Jersey to Bronxville, New York. And I only had 1 dollar in my pocket but stopped by a diner to get a cup of coffee with my last dollar, thinking my life is a tragedy, always tragedy, tragedy after tragedy, and I am crying. The owner asked me, "What's the matter?" "I got a scholarship to go to school, and someone gave me 1500 dollars and I only have 1 dollar left and can't get to school." "Can you work?" he asked. "I can work, but I can't walk," I told him, "I can work." "Ok, come tomorrow at four in the morning and open the diner." "Okay."

When I went home, my neighbor's wife came out and, a synchronization of events, came out and said, "My father died and I am giving away his stuff. Do you want this bicycle? Do you know, maybe it will help exercise your leg." "OK." I biked from the top of the hill down the hill, to the diner at the bottom of the hill at 4:00 am, I was there in front of the diner {explains the street with her hands}. The owner was Greek, all the enemies of my people gave me jobs, but the enemies never treated me like enemies, they loved me. I never looked at them as enemies. His name was Bill, when I went inside he had lined up bricks behind the bar so I could place my broken leg on the bricks so I didn't have to move it.

My job was this, pour Coca-Cola like this {explains with hands}. I had my leg on the bricks, I placed my crutches underneath, and only moved my right leg and the right side of my body. I picked up dirty dishes, then placed them on top of the bar and handed them to the kitchen, then poured more Coca-Cola {mimics the work}. I used to make about 80 dollars per day from the tips people gave me. No one looked at me as a disabled person. I finished work at 2:00 pm, took a taxi, put my bike in a taxi because I couldn't go bike uphill to go home.

At that time I used to work for the famous actress Olympia Dukakis, I had left the family I was working for and I took care of her children and I cooked for them. Olympia was never home, so I made food from 2:00 pm to 4:00 pm for the kids of Olympia Dukakis. I lived in the attic over their garage because the attic had a



skylight and when the moon passed through, my bed was under the skylight, and I used to watch the moon and the stars, and the moon entered like that. I wrote poetry just because of the skylight. I lived over the garage without a bathroom, or anything, just because of that skylight.

Then, from 4:00 pm I walked slowly on my crutches to the bus, carrying the books on my back. I took the bus from New York to New York City, that took 45 minutes. When I arrived in New York I had to take the subway from the West side to the East side, then take another train to go to Bronxville, thus I arrived in Bronxville at 17:45, just a few minutes before six o'clock I arrived in Bronxville, took a taxi to the College and attended classes from six to nine o'clock, then I returned home where I arrived at midnight, I had only four hours sleep.

This lasted for two and half years. During this healing period, during my studies, these studies became an escape from the harsh reality of America. I mean, I had no papers, no money, no health, no family, I was all alone without anyone, the end of the end. The phenomenon was that I had many friends and escaped into the beauty of this College. I finished before Joshua. I graduated with honors in December 1985, having started in 1983. Imagine, I finished in 1985. Right after that, in 1986 I started my Master's at New York University and this was by mistake, because that's how things happen to me, I had applied to English literature, but they forwarded my application to Liberal Arts. I graduated in Performance Arts, Theater, this is what they told me, I forgot now what they told me.

However, my professional life in America began from the bottom, really from the bottom of the bottoms, meaning I worked 27 different jobs. I was a clown, wrote my songs, wrote my poetry. I painted my clown face myself, dressed up by myself, bought my own instruments, castagnettes for children, I did it all by myself. I worked as a clown in Harlem for six months of course without pay because they were poor, and it was there where my interest for humanity began. I always had in my soul the desire to help others, to lift them up, to raise awareness and help others because I felt that I was very lucky. As a child we were very rich, the first bicycle was mine, other children didn't have bicycle, and I let everyone ride my bicycle in turns and I would be the last to ride my bicycle. Therefore, I was incredibly lucky in that aspect because as children we had everything, all the best things. I also wanted my friends to have it, because they didn't have it, they didn't have it. My first chocolate came from Italy, my first doll came from Turkey. It was very important to remember all these things in my life and help those who didn't have [them]. This is where my involvement in the world of the less fortunate began. Thus, I went to Harlem every day to work with the children who didn't have a chance to pay for the celebration of their birthdays, so I worked for free. In the end naturally I went bankrupt because I had to live. I had to tell God, "Hey brother, why do you send me these ideas? Why do you send these ideas to my head and I can never make money?" Ok, I had to give that up, so I gave that up.

I was dog sitter, baby sitter, old people sitter. I was a cook and became a master chef. I learned, I went from not knowing how to cook two eggs to how to cook different cuisines. I used to cater parties and made a lot of money, then I spent all my money on the poor. This is how I was always without money, really always without money. I never had money and I always had money. I don't know how to say it. Little by little America was a very good thing, I wanted to grow, to become a human being, that's what my grandmother wanted me to be. I went to all the theaters, saw some plays for 32 time. My record is the Phantom of the Opera, I saw it 20 time, I have memorized all the songs. I brought whomever came to visit, all my guests, to see the Phantom, I know all the songs, when the actors make mistakes, I know everything. I saw all the plays, all the operas, all the ballets, whatever was in season in New York, I saw it all with all my guests.



Whatever money I made went into this type of investment, personal growth. I finished my Master's. I created, wrote, worked everyday, sometimes two jobs a day. I worked for Editor & Publisher Company, which was the only company in America devoted to journalism. They did research on all the world newspapers and they saved everything in the archives, all the journalists' work from different newspapers. I was the Information Manager who transferred all the information from the archives to the electronic archives after the computers came out. I became very fast with all the information and with journalists. One day I found the name of an old man in the archives, the father of Public Relations, the relations with the public and advertising, he was 94 years-old, his name was Edward Bernays, so I said I want to go and interview him. He was Sigmund Freud's nephew, I discovered that he was alive and lived in Boston, and he was near Harvard.

So I call him on the phone, he said, "Come" and I went to interview Edward Bernays. Edward Bernays was fascinated with my vitality, how could I heal myself, how I matured, how I fought so much. He then taught me the twelve rules of success, how to achieve success and I stayed three days with Edward Bernays in his house, in the house of this old man. He cooked fish for dinner, he pulled fish out of the freezer, it was frozen and he just sautee it a bit, but he didn't really cook it well, how can you eat that fish? The professors from Harvard whom he invited for dinner ate it all, only I couldn't eat it. I said, "This is frozen," and he said "This is good for you." (laughs)

Anyhow, he told me the basis of how success is achieved, with positive thinking and with the strategy that a person must eliminate the doubts that he has in his head. I never forgot this, it was the beginning of my professionalism. When I returned, I published my interview and I started to work with refugees, to convince them that they could change their lives. I was sure that I could convince refugees, "Of course you can change your life." Naturally they changed their life a lot, I worked so hard with them to make this positive change, with love, love, I mean, I carried all the love I had for my family, and expressed it for refugees and immigrants.

I learned all the laws of America, I learned them all because I wanted to regularize my status, I studied all the laws until I regularized my status. When I learned all the laws, the war in Kosovo started and just before the war started, people started to emigrate. The lawyers charged all Albanians ten thousands of dollars and never solved their cases. I started to prepare their cases and write their stories, I wrote good stories because I had graduated in writing and had become a writer. I wrote their life stories the way they were, I wrote in English, and the stories looked bigger than they were. More than two thousands people received political asylum from my applications. I did this work for free. I did their papers and saved them from the expenses that lawyer were charging. What else did I do? Many, many things.

I got involved in the lives of immigrants and refugee and I began with women's rights. In 1993 the women's organization Motrat Qiriazhi was formed. Because I was an actress, an artist, I always performed in my own performances, holding monologues and dancing. I performed in non-conventional theaters, in modern improvising theaters, and all this was in New York, in different performance places. For example, I had an evening of poetry with a violin. The violinist was from Belgium, I used my poetry. We placed candles on the stage, he was dressed all in black holding a white violin, and we held a performance against the war in Iraq. I was always against something: against oppression, against Iraq [war], against war. I was always for these things.

I decided not to do my performances alone, but to dedicate them to Motrat Qiriazhi. Instead than coming to the public as only Shqipe Malushi, which did not have much importance, I offered them to do performances on their name. Anyway, I was doing that for myself too. This way their popularity would

increase, and I had enough space, and we would be recognized as Albanians, because we felt we were vanishing through assimilation. They accepted and we started to organize this way. For the first ten years we worked as volunteers and in 1993, at the first gathering, 300 women from the community came and joined us, and this was just before our community awakening, women started to get educated. We worked night and day.

When the war started, the government called us because we were the only women's organization, "We want to fund your organization, and will give you 190,000 dollars, you must gather refugees and teach them, give them skills so they can get jobs. Enable them to get skills so they can get work, work with this money." The board called me and said, "We selected you to be the Executive Director, come." I had no clue where to start from, so I began from the beginning, what an organization! I was a performer. We rented an office in the Hotel New Yorker and we began. Within a year I increased the budget to one million and eight hundred thousand dollars, we went from one employee to sixteen employees. I opened three offices and had 22 programs a year. We mobilized the community and build relationships among three hundred thousands people in New York. We participated in demonstrations, we got different funds that increased.

I kept my performances and worked with Olympia Dukakis, Vanessa Redgrave, Eve Ensler and all these famous people who felt for the Albanian people. "What?" I'd say, "Come on, come on, let's have a performance, let's collect funds." With a performance we organized on Broadway we raised 26,000 dollars in two hours. This is how we raised a lot of money through Motrat Qiriazhi in Kosovo. Motrat Qiriazhi's sister organization from Kosovo supported us a lot while we were there, they guided us, we began our collaboration with Igo Rugova, with Safete Rugova and with Marte Prekpalaj, and many others whose names now I can't remember.

I returned to Kosovo after 15 years in 1995, they received me like a princess, I will never forget that (cries). It was a very sad return because I loved my place and my people, but wanted much more. I couldn't bear the sadness that my family felt, and all my people, Igo and Safete, had. I published my first poetry book, *Per Ty* [For You]. Safete had taken my manuscript in one of her trips to New York, because I leave things everywhere. She brought the manuscript to Kosovo and published it. So poetry evenings were organized in Kosovo while the Serbian militaries walked around with guns. Because I didn't look scared, because I had just come back from America, Albanians used to tell me, you look like a "Shkina" [derogatory word for Serb], and the Serbs didn't bother me. I walked freely in Peja, and they all thought I was a Serb and didn't stop me.

The first poetry reading in Peja was held in one cafe near the river, they had blocked the windows with black curtains because they were afraid to turn on the light and the Serbs would see them, and we had a candlelight poetry reading. I didn't have the strength to read my poetry, but the youth, those young women read my poetry, someone played the piano along. That was how big the desire to keep art alive was, to keep the memories and to continue life. I will never forget that, I never had the strength to write about this, didn't have the strength to write about these memories of my life, because they were very sad, very, very sad. I fled. They asked me, "Why you don't come back to Kosovo?" I didn't have the emotional strength to return to Kosovo and carry the pain of all my people.

We started with activities of Motrat Qiriazhi in 1993, when some women in the community decided to form the organization named Motrat Qiriazhi. Shqipe Biba was the founder of the organization, while I, as an artist, created individual performances. I joined them because I was very creative, and we taught to hold different plays and activities in the community and raise as many funds as we could. I remember the first

night, at the opening of Motrat Qiriazhi, when three hundred women came that night...We held this evening at Shaqir Gashi's restaurant La Rondine, where Parashqevi Simaku sang. All the men went crazy saying, "What do you want from our wives? Why are you gathering women?" That first evening went very well, but they interfered with a second event, in the second month, because they had doubts about all the women together. What was happening there? What was said? What if they did bad things?

We decided to award all the men, all the activists of the community, and we publicly gave them certificates during the second meeting, a month later. We showed our respect to all the men, we decided to show them that we didn't have any ill thought or decision or bad behavior. We only wanted to gather the community and create and serve our people with the information that they needed. The activities started, I remember the newspaper Illyria, after they received their award, they gave us two full middle pages to write about our activities. The Television Victoria gave us 15 minutes television program to report about our activities within the community, and like this, we grew and began many activities. During the war refugees... for years as volunteers, from 1993 until 1999, six full years, we created events for every holiday, we had activities, helped people with translations, presented them in political asylum cases at the Immigration. We were like a mother, an open door for the community. We didn't have an office then, but we operated from our own homes, and people knew where to call us. They knew where to come, and we became like a center.

In 1999, a little bit before the war, when the refugees arrived we began our main activity with them. Just before the refugees came, we organized the first classical music concert for Albanian artists from all the Albanian lands, from Tirana to Paris, from Ireland to Greece, all big names. We held the first Albanian classical music concert, just when a week later the Jashari family was killed. It was like a premonition, a mevlud [funeral rite], because the concert was very sad and it started from çifteli to Mozart and on that moment we understood that it was a premonition of our national unity through art, the suffering we felt a week later, when the Jashari family was killed. We were very connected to the Kosovo cause and we experienced all the suffering that our people in Kosovo experienced with them. Even though our families and friends were here, we suffered with the people.

In 1999 the government gave us the first 120,000 dollars to open an office for the Kosovo refugees. With the little funds we got, we opened the office with two employees, myself and Venera Bekteshi, a young woman, and within a year we multiplied the funds and made 1 million and 800 thousand dollars. We employed 16 refugee women, opened three offices, created our television program, our own radio program, we had a magazine, Shpresa, that I will show you later, which was distributed all over the world. We had 22 different activities, from children's to mothers', to education, integration and adaptation to American life, employment, and all activities that the community needed.

This is the way we started to build the community and to support them and to entertain them with our artists, and we worked for years like this. A week ago the organization Motrat Qiriazhi celebrated the 20th anniversary of their activities, now they do much less, because the funds have dried up, and the conditions have become difficult, they have returned to operating from homes as volunteers. During this period we had a hard time, we tried to maintain our relationship with Motrat Qiriazhi in Kosovo, we gathered funds, a lot of funds from America went to Kosovo, we invited guests from Kosovo, in order to introduce our community and not let the community forget. We were there for every occasion, for funerals, for births, for weddings, for separations, we were there for every occasion. They needed Motrat Qiriazhi in every family, we were present and ready to help. We helped with children heart surgeries, helped with education and different scholarships.

I remember once when I came to Kosovo with an American youth group in 2003, to help the victims of Krusha e Vogel and Krusha e Madhe. We brought many books, clothes for these orphans. We came by bus from Turkey and arrived to Kosovo's borders. Naturally they stopped the buses, and in those buses there were traders who went to Turkey to buy merchandise, and when we were stopped at the border, they became very afraid that their merchandise would be discovered and confiscated. We stopped, and we had 20 huge suitcases for the orphans, about 25 young people from 15 to 20 years of age. When we were stopped, after waiting for an hour, a young man approached me and said, "Who is Shqipe Malushi here?" I came forward, "Shqipe Malushi." He said, "Can I hug you?" (smiles). "Of course you can, brother, you can, well blessed you, but who are you?" I said. "I am a man whom you forgot, but I never forgot you because you got me a high school scholarship when I was in America and you put me in college. And today I finished my college and I am the Director of the Border Police. So welcome to Kosovo, which is your bus?" He said. "This is our bus," I said, pointing to the bus. "Don't touch this bus!" He said. "You saved the orphans, brother, because these suitcases are not for me, not for us, but for the orphans," I said. "Don't worry at all, just move forward." I had tears in my eyes, what does doing good once means! It is never forgotten. Look, I had forgotten that boy and didn't even know who he was, and there were many of these cases, Motrat Qiriazhi made possible for people to feel secure.

**Donjeta Berisha:** What do you consider your biggest achievements?

**Shqipe Malushi:** Ah, my biggest achievement was when I was a child, I had a great desire to understand all the languages of the world, and at the end I got to understand that all world languages can be wrapped up in one word called love. Because this love is in every nation, every country, and every race is the same, every person knows it, and it is communicated without words. I have arrived to a level where I can express my love and accept it from all different nations. I think this is my biggest achievement, that I can transmit my love beyond borders and became an ambassador of goodwill on my people's behalf, also embodying a feeling of great love that we had once, long ago, from great grandfathers, and grandfathers. I tried very hard to save our values, and I managed to save my great grandfather's and grandfather's values, this is my biggest achievement.

Let us not mention the achievements in education, hundreds of certificates, awards that I have received, they really are not much compared to this love that burns like a flame and continues to burn for the people that surround us outside the country. However, those who know me in India, Afghanistan, Middle East, wherever I travel, who ever know me, think that all Albanians are the same, because I express love in that way. This is for me an achievement.

There is another achievement, I make people laugh in every language regardless whether they are Chinese or Africans, I have achieved to make people laugh through humor, to make people laugh, this is very difficult work. However, I think this is my biggest achievement, that people laugh and forget their suffering for a moment, regardless of the language and place wherever I travel, everyone laughs (smiles).

Yes, it was war, and before the war began in Kosovo I was the first woman from the Balkans who received political asylum in America. It took six years, from 1981 when the students started the demonstrations. In 1990, when Serbs fired people from work, closed the schools and I was very active in every demonstration, I wrote different articles. That's why this was my beginning, and I became involved not only with Albanians, but also became involved with American families through my television appearances debating with Serbs.

1993 was a key year, a key year when I started to be active in human rights. I was invited to participate in a debate with a very famous and very smart Serbian lawyer, Serdja Popovic, also the Bosnian Ambassador and the Croatian Ambassador. They [men in the community] didn't have time and so someone recommended me and I accepted to be in the debate. I researched for the whole week, I discovered all the murders, the numbers of those in Kosovo. The evening before the debate, the community men came and said, "Better cancel this, because if you dishonor us, Oh my God, this is a very important moment! Let some men handle this talk, because you are a woman and you don't know." And I said, "I will make you proud."

I memorized all my research. When Serdja Popovic came out, naturally he was very smart, he held his powerful speech, this was at a university, the hall was filled with people, and all the media were there. Then the Bosnian Ambassador spoke, and they left me for last. I told them I wasn't feeling very good and asked to be the last. They all said what they had to say, I listened and got what they had to say. When I started, it was like a rat'a'tat'tat of a machine gun fire... They were left speechless. Everyone was quiet, not a word, no one had anything to say. I spoke about facts, not only from the heart, but facts! This year these many were killed, that year these many were raped, this year these many were expelled from the country. What happened? A Serbian woman asked me a question, "What do you suggest we must do?" I will never forget, it was 1993, I got up on my feet and said, "War. We have to fight in order to survive." I would have never said that today, but then I wanted us to win the war with all my heart, because our suffering had reached the top of the roof. You know, remembering that now, we were young, I got up on my feet and said, "War." The war started six years later, but what happened then? We didn't start it, but it started because they almost killed us. I used to eat my words then.

I started to collaborate with many different organizations that approached me. At that moment our community was very happy with me, I was in every television, I honored them as they said it was one of the speeches that made them proud. From that moment on, my human rights activism started. We fought with all flesh and soul, together with Motrat Qiriazhi in Kosovo, we worked a lot. I worked with the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children Organization from New York, with the late Mary Diaz, a very, very capable woman who supported all refugees and immigrants. She loved me and supported me very much. When the war started and refugees went to Albania, I didn't really have any direct experience with refugees until then. But she had faith in me and believed that I could do it, and she sent me to Albania. So I went to Albania together with the refugees, we collected a lots of funds and distributed these funds, we discovered the injustice that was done to the refugees. We discovered many things. This was a very big job and I felt very proud of the work I did.

Unfortunately I fell sick during my work in Albania and I had to interrupt my work and return home. But we get back to that a bit later.

The first day, when Kosovo was liberated, we came back to Kosovo with Motrat Qiriazhi of Kosovo, we entered the first day together with the army. On the day of liberation, we were the first to ones to arrive after the army. People surrounded me saying as I walked in the streets of Pristina, "Ah, Shqipe Malushi welcome to the homeland!" I don't know who that was. "Can I hug you?" "Yes, brother, you can hug me." He hugged me. "Ah, you gave us hope in Albania, you saved us in Albania." I didn't save them, but a single sweet word sometimes can save a life, just because it gives you hope. My words gave people a lot of hope, so they thought I was saving them. This is what it's happening today with human rights. Now I am beyond the borders of Kosovo, I am beyond the Balkan borders, now I travel the world. I don't fight for human rights with emotions, but I use emotions for healing and rehabilitation and to explain facts, so when they are solved no one can say anything. Because there isn't anyone who is not hurting. Human rights are

abused in many places, in many ways, that's why it is our duty, especially for us activists, it is our duty to deal with these rights.

**Donjeta Berisha:** Tell us about your U.S. experience in the military base?

**Shqipe Malushi:** After I returned in Kosovo, they asked me to work for the army with NATO in the Bondsteel camp with American soldiers. We were the first who came, so there were 7500 men, and I was among the first women who were with them. I swear to God, it wasn't a good feeling to be in a camp with 7500 men. I don't have a single complaint, it was just that feeling that you are not free with all these men around you. So I thought, what to do, what to do? We worked on different missions in the villages. One time we went on a mission to the top of the hill somewhere in the villages near the Serbian border where Serbs lived. We used to sleep in the forest, it was very difficult, all men, only I was a woman. For any biological need, it wasn't easy as a woman to be in the army.

I was working when one day a Serb passed by with his seven dogs. They had covered my name because they didn't want them to know whether I was Albanian or Serbian. They didn't explain this to anyone because I knew Serbian very well. So when the Serb passed I was translating for the captain. So the captain asked him, "How are you doing here?" "Oh it is very difficult, don't ask! You can't live with Albanians," he said. The captain turned red in his face because he knew I was Albanian. I asked him, "Why, what did the Albanians do to you?" "They are wild people," he continued. "They stole Sava's seven cows, they stole them." "Did you report it to KFOR?" the captain asked. "Of course we reported it to KFOR," he said. "So what happened? Did KFOR help you?" "Ah well, they returned six, but they slaughtered one." (laughs). As he was looking into my eyes he said, "Look sister, may God never let you have to deal with Albanians. Be careful with them!" (laughs). "Don't worry, it will get better. Not everyone is that bad." And I let him pass, wondering why should I bother to convince this man! I was in the position neither to defend myself, or to be involved, I only had to translate. That moment was one of the moments that stayed in my memory, sometimes you look the enemy in the eye and let him pass. That's why, from that moment, I do not accept offenses from people who are lower than me, so I let it pass, because if you don't accept them, they are...

Once, "What to do? What to do?" I began to read Turkish coffee cups because I knew how to do it... I didn't have anything to do at the base, since we didn't go on missions for three or four weeks in a row, there was nothing to do, just loose your mind. So I told them that I could read their coffee cup, I told the soldiers, "Do you want me to read your cup?" There was a line waiting for the coffee cup reading, and I became so popular, don't even ask how. From the lowest rank up to the general, they called me and asked me to look at their coffee cup. They gave me two medals for moral support to the soldiers (laughs). Many soldiers committed suicide, I felt sorry for them. I wanted to be kind to them, and I was kind to them because I used to talk to them and tell them stories, I was kind, I used the coffee cup reading.

I was among the first feminists when feminism started with Gloria Steinem. Ah, I was really a feminist! What we understand with feminism? Education of women, women's freedom, women's choice, respect for women, the right of women to live their life the way they want, to be valued for what they are, and to have the same chance to create as man. I spent all my life trying to prove that I was like my brother, the same as a man because I had a mind that worked, I had rights, I was a human being. I didn't want anybody to think on my behalf, because I could think for myself. Therefore, being a pioneer feminist, I am an example of choosing to live my life the way I wanted to, so I live the way I want and I am very happy. I confront my challenges in life, I don't have complaints. I had many challenges in my life, sicknesses, falls,



and hurts. However, I do not have any complaint because this is part of life, but I live my life the way I want and I am a feminist.

Now the term feminism is no longer being used, because it started in wrong way, it grew in a wrong way. Trying to prove that women had rights, women became like men. They started wearing pants, started to act as men, they started to compete. This is not feminism. Feminist is women's self-sustainability, women's rights to create and be. We have lost our femininity in the name of feminism, that's where all women made a mistake, because work was added, we started to work more, but were paid less than men. We also started to do house work, family work, plus giving birth, working outside, career. That's why women's bodies are not created to endure such pressure, they get old before time, get sick a lot. That's why feminism has dropped from the public sphere, and women again don't know what direction to take, what name to give to women's rights. I am among the first...

I was attending a conference, and would like to tell you about it {turns toward the camera}. The conference was called "Women's Empowerment in New York" and Gloria Steinem, the mother of feminism at that time, was there to give a speech. She got married when she was 60 years-old, she didn't get married until she became 60, then she got married. She was giving a speech about her husband's death and now she was 66 years-old, she was crying on the stage. I raised my hand when they asked if someone had to say something. I raised my hand so I could tell her what role she had played in my life. So I got up to talk and said, "Look, I spent all my life watching you on television and reading your feminist books, and my mother always said, 'When are you going to get married?' I would say, 'Look, Gloria Steinem is not married, why do I have to get married?' One day, 20 years later, the minute I opened the door, my mom, having seen on Tv that Gloria Steinem got married, said, 'Come, come here daughter, and watch this woman who left you unmarried, and she herself got married. Come watch, watch!' I acted surprised when I saw that Gloria Steinem got married." Gloria laughed and said, "Tell you mother, there is plenty of time for marriage. Don't rush when you decide to get married." (laughs). With this I ended feminism, at that moment I thought ok, after she got married, her husband died so she is still free (laughs). Of course feminists don't need to get married. This is feminism for me.

My dreams were fantastic. I dreamed of becoming an actress, since I went to America I dreamed of going to Hollywood and become an actress. But when I arrived in America, I couldn't become an actress because I didn't know the language well enough, and life imposed itself on me. I had to survive, then I changed direction. Instead of being an actress I became a writer. My second dream was to become a writer. I realized both my dreams, acting and writing, I became a writer and now I act during my presentations, wishing that people understood me. I act, I write my roles, I write my dialogues, I write books (laughs). My dreams came true. I went to America. I travelled the world, I am traveling and helping people. These were my dreams, I created plenty and I am very happy. I am more famous than I expected to be, but I don't live for fame. For me now, my biggest dream is to be in service of God, to help people in the service of goodness, in service of truth. This is for me now the evening of my life and I want to end it in the light. I want my love to transform into light, to warm people's hearts, wherever I go I want to bring hope. This now is my last dream, and I am working on it.

My past in Kosovo has stopped, it has stopped in my heart, in my memories with all the values of my predecessors, and because I left home very early, I didn't experience your Albanian modern transformation, and neither did I accept it, because I am not part of that transformation. I mean, I left at the time when those values were sacred. For example, when I went to Afghanistan to work, those old values and my upbringing matched the present time of Afghanistan. For example, when I saw the houses



in Kabul, those walls were similar to my grandmother's time during my upbringing, they had the same aroma, and the behavior of people were the same as my grandmother's. My memories come to life in Afghanistan and become reality. And in that reality I try to raise their awareness about the transformation that modernity brought us. Hence, I am only a bridge of connections between memories and reality in order to help people make this passage from one period into another. This helped me a lot, because these memories and my grandmother's upbringing made me very strong, gave me a direction, and gave me the means to express my behavior, because people recognize them in every culture. Therefore I communicate easily with different cultures, because of these values and upbringing.

**Donjeta Berisha:** What challenges do you see for women in New York, compared to women here?

**Shqipe Malushi:** My challenges in New York were very big because there were different levels of people's education. For example, for the Albanian women from Albania who were very educated, it was very difficult, they came from much suffering and fell into a bigger suffering. But the Albanian women from Albania were very smart, they didn't take the broom immediately, they didn't want to choose cleaning as their work so they could eat, they went to university, they endured a lot and we had to support them and encourage them. We had difficulties in finding them jobs at their level, because when you come as an immigrant, you come and go to the bottom of the bottoms, nothing to be done...You could have Master's degree, there were some Ph.D's, but they didn't have bread to eat because they didn't know English.

On the other hand, our [Kosovo] women came from the war, they didn't have the knowledge nor the tools to work. We employed them, they didn't know how to work, they used to get upset when I wanted to teach them, it was work of cultural adaptation. For example, we were a non-for profit organization, but we had to work as professionals because all donors gave funds and wanted reports, they wanted us to report every second, and they didn't know how to report. They didn't know how to work and had problems with adaptability. This was a problem because our community is stuck in memory. I wanted to bring them up to the American level, we had a grander vision than the community was ready for. So we couldn't manage to bring them higher because they resisted. And because of this, sometimes it was very difficult to collaborate. We wanted to move forward, they pulled us backwards.

Here in Kosovo there is another suffering, here people are very aggravated with each other, and people are afraid of success. When they see someone moving forward, they want to destroy them, because they are used to victimization. In victimization, a person cannot see the light, they only cry and complain, seeing everything around them worse and worse. In both Krusha e Vogel and Krusha e Madhe, they suffered a big tragedy that happened during the war, when all their husbands were killed, leaving some women without any means to live, without tools, without schools, without work, without absolutely anything, and in total depression. How can you tell them "You can work!" Marta Prekvukaj worked with those women. She is a fantastic woman who never gave up. For example, maybe I wouldn't have that much patience with their depression, but she never gave up.

After ten years, this is what women of Krusha are doing: they opened businesses, they sell cheese, milk, yogurts, pickled vegetables, they are going to conferences abroad and introduce themselves. Do you see that it can be done? They stood on their feet because they understood that as long as they saw themselves as victims, not even God would help them. The moment that they accepted responsibility, all the doors began to open. The women of Krusha have become an example, they became the example of how women can change their lives and transform positively. For that you need patience, you need time to achieve goals, this is a life long work, and it is never ending, it doesn't end with one person, it doesn't end

with ten people, and it doesn't end with thousands of people. It is like a river that flows, flows, flows, while culture is changing with time.

See the period of my grandmother has disappeared and all those people have disappeared, and the culture has disappeared and it remains within me only as a memory, when I will disappear, that too will be gone. And nothing will remain, nothing. For example, see that photo on the wall {shows the wall} these are the women of the past. They are almost all gone, only a few are still alive. I hung that photo to remind myself that I am a fruit of their seed today, not to forget those values of good behavior, patience, hope, and beauty. They had beauty and love, and goodness because no one ate a bite without sharing it with the other, with neighbors, they cared about their neighbors. Today we don't have this phenomenon, we are only for ourselves, sometimes we are not even for ourselves. That's why we have to have much patience to make change happen (laughs).