

INTERVIEW WITH VOTIM DEMIRI

Prizren | Date: May 5, 2017

Duration: 40 minutes

Present:

1. Votim Demiri (Speaker)
2. Erëmirë Krasniqi (Interviewer)
3. Donjeta Berisha (Camera)

Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:

() – emotional communication

{ } – the speaker explains something using gestures.

Other transcription conventions:

[] – addition to the text to facilitate comprehension

Footnotes are editorial additions to provide information on localities, names or expressions.

Part One

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you introduce yourself and can you tell us your story, your family's, and the life in Prizren?

Votim Demiri: Yes, my name is Votim Demiri. I am 72 years old. I have finished my education in Belgrade. I am an electronic engineer. Then, after my studies, I worked in Prizren and we always lived in Prizren. At some point, I became the director of the biggest textile factory in town. After some years, they moved me to Pristina. I became a member of the back then government and was in charge of foreign economic relations. Two years later, they moved me to France as the Head of the Economic Chamber of former Yugoslavia where I stayed for five years, and I retired when I returned.

Yes, life in Prizren is different from other regions of Kosovo. This is my personal opinion, but nothing has [dis]proved that Prizren has a greater scale of tolerance, of understanding between people, ethnicities, religions... so after '99, when the Jewish community of Pristina spread out when they moved to Israel...only the Jews living in Prizren remained here.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you go earlier? Can you return to your early childhood and tell us something about your life in Prizren after the Second World War?

Votim Demiri: After the Second World War we lived in a secular state, even now we are a secular state, but most of the people were atheists. What do I know about religion? I know all of it because of my mother at home. During Jewish holidays, mother would tell us, she would prepare what needed to be prepared for that day, but within the family, let's say, when we have the holiday of Passover, my mother would always cook rice with chicken, and she would always give me the leg of the chicken, but for Passover she would only give me the wing because according to the Jewish tradition, child must learn how to fly. I would complain, "Bre,¹ mother, why like this...can't you?"

You know the fruit, nectarine? It has 653 seeds. But in every seed there is a guide to Jewish religion, what one must do. So, it is a religion, not to say a difficult one, but one cannot become Jewish nor get

¹ Colloquial: used to emphasize the sentence, it expresses strong emotion. *More* adds emphasis, like *bre*, similar to the English bro, brother.

out of it. The *de-n-kaya* [DNA] decides there, blood. During your life, you can be passive, not engage in these activities, but you cannot get out of it, there are no ways you can get out of the religion.

And how was life here, knowing that over 95 percent of the people are Muslim? Other religions such as Serbian Orthodox, Christianity, Catholicism, and recently Protestantism as well, but Prizren is interesting because there have never been religious problems until this day. In the end of the day, those are the virtues of the Albanian nation. The Albanian nation itself carries three religions within itself, but they are part of a single nation. It's been a quiet, normal life, but nowadays some things have changed. I believe it will become better, but until the situation of the extremists is overcome...but I don't believe that it can have deep roots in Kosovo...because our generation, women as well as men wear jeans, and are educated in another way.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were there other Jewish families in Prizren?

Votim Demiri: Yes (coughs).

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What kind of relations did you have, or how did you identify each other?

Votim Demiri: My mother remained in Prizren, as a woman who got married to an Albanian from Prizren here. And from these women...today we have 16 families (coughs), in Prizren. Unfortunately...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: 16 members or 16 families?

Votim Demiri: 16 families, counting the family, wife and husband and their children. But, unfortunately the Jews who lived in Vushtrri, Novo Brdo, Pristina don't exist anymore, they don't exist anymore. This is the reality. What are the perspectives of living here? I believe that building a secular system, there will be place for everyone. I am convinced so. But, one child born in Prizren cannot go on without practically knowing three languages. That's Prizren's characteristic: Albanian, Serbian or Bosnian, whichever you want and the old Turkish. They would say in Prizren, "Nowadays, you don't know what language is spoken in that shop." But knowing the three languages, the communication is easy.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What language did you speak in your family?

Votim Demiri: {raises his eyebrows as a sign that he didn't hear the question}

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What language did you speak in your family?

Votim Demiri: Ah, we...my father was Albanian and he was a partisan, he fought. He married my mother. We spoke Albanian and the old Turkish. But we had no particular intention to speak a language. The communication was easy. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo, Enver Hoxhaj, attended the celebration of the Day of Turkey, and he delivered a speech where he said what I

practically always thought about, “In Prizren, you start the conversation in a language and finish it in another.” We are used to this.

But, the Jewish communities in the region have regular contacts. The Jewish organizations around the world have accepted us as Jewish communities from Kosovo, we are members, to mention, there is the European Parliament of Jews. And when we first had a meeting in Brussels, it took place in the institution of the European Parliament. And we were greeted by all those who show up on televisions now from there, Ulrike Lunacek, and...The second meeting took place in Vienna, because Vienna was the center of Jews and the museum is there as well. Members of the French Parliament came to deliver speeches there.

One month ago, we had a meeting in the German Bundestag, in the Parliament of Germany, where we were delivered a speech by the right hand of Angela Merkel, Petra Pauzov or Petra Pau.... So, we are engaged in these activities, we have our own businesses...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us the story of your mother? When we talked privately, it sounded very interesting how she joined the partisans. Also the whole story...

Votim Demiri: Yes...

Erëmirë Krasniqi:...of hers, what happened, how did it come about?

Votim Demiri: Yes, the biggest Jewish community there was, was in Pristina, and my mother was born in Pristina. Until '40... 1943, until the Italian occupation of Kosovo and other Albanian regions took place, Jews from these regions didn't have the final solution of Hitler, it didn't reach its end. But after the fall of Italy, Germans returned to Kosovo and the deportation of Jews began. But the irony of life or of history... I was very interested in knowing about my grandfather, grandmother, maternal uncle, what happened, how had they died and what had they died from.

And the irony of life, when I wrote a letter to the Holocaust Memorial Center in Barenberg of Germany, they sent me the exact list. Germans were always correct. Now I have the date of deportation, birthdate as well as the deportation and death date. After that...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you give us more details, who ended up in the concentration camp?

Votim Demiri: My grandfather, Hajem, my grandmother and my older maternal uncle. Two of my younger maternal aunts, they are here in the photograph {shows the photograph in the wall}, they were young, but they were deported in '43. And the Second World War ended soon, their turn practically didn't come. My mother became a partisan in '41, she was 18, to fight against fascism. This has nothing to do with the system that was to be constructed in Kosovo and former Yugoslavia. It had nothing to do with communism, but she did it to save her life.

When the war was over, since she had decided to marry my father, he was from Prizren, and they decided to stay here. My younger maternal aunts, there was an organizing for Jews to go to Israel in '48 and they went there where they created their families. They are still alive, they live. My mother, her whole life, after Pristina and the war, she moved to Prizren and lived here. She spoke six languages, she was that type of person. She only had finished the *matura*² but she had language skills and it was easy for her to learn them. She spoke Turkish, Albanian, French, Spanish of course and Italian and all these...Watching our mother, we slowly...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How many children were you? I mean how many brothers and sisters? How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Votim Demiri: I have one sister who got married in Montenegro. She's been living in Bar for forty years now. And I have a brother who is my neighbor. He is a doctor, an internist. One brother and one sister. But the moment they decided to go to Israel, my sister and I were already born, so my mother didn't want to take the risk of going there with the children and she remained here, and in the end of the day, she wasn't mistaken. We feel like autochthonous *prizrenas*,³ always... and we have always lived in this neighborhood.

Part Two

Votim Demiri: Eh, what else do I tell you...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did your mother cultivate the feeling or the sense of your Jewish identity? Can you tell us? The Jewish identity, did she work to cultivate it? I mean, all the photographs, how did she...

Votim Demiri: Yes...

Erëmirë Krasniqi:...introduce them to you? Who were these people, what did they represent for you?

Votim Demiri: It is, it is a difficult question. But when we want to praise Jews, we always have some parameters that we call facts. Among the concrete facts, the last Einstein formula is still valid. Until this day, I don't know what happens later...But, in the immaterial world, the action of Sigmund Freud cannot be passed, that is the base to all spiritual sciences. So, when we want to praise, the truth is that almost half of the Nobel Prize winners are Jews. So, one can think whether it is the commission that awards the prizes or the Jews themselves. We can say that, but it is not true.

² *Maturë or Maturë e Madhe*, a set of examinations given to students after the eighth year of elementary school (High school graduation).

³ *Prizrenas*, refers to people coming from Prizren.

But, there is another logic, another logic that is about adapting to the situations, and they have always accepted the life system of the places where they lived. To be honest, I know all the Jews of the region and we are talking...the Jews from Bosnia, Sephardic, like us, hold the side of Bosnia, the Croatian Jews hold the side of Croatia, the Serbian Jews hold the side of Serbia. And we, from Kosovo, are Kosovars first. That is a kind of, how to say, a common denominator, a...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Common.

Votim Demiri:... common. But, there are topics where Jews unite, the anti-Semitism problem, problems that happen around the world... and... I guess that in 2020, they are working in that direction, that the Jews from all around the world will say for themselves that they are Israeli, because at this moment, the Jewish religion is facing the problem of a fluid identity, not hard to understand. But we will see how things will go, but the Jewish diaspora at this time is much bigger than the number of Jews in Israel. But, they say that after 2020, this big Jewish community will be in Israel. That is what they say.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were there problems with anti-Semitism in this region? Did you experience something like that?

Votim Demiri: There is a Jewish writer who, Hannah Arendt, who says, “Anti-Semitism doesn’t exist only on the moon.” But, it is not a new problem, Jews know how to face such problems, but living in Prizren we slightly got to experience it. We go out freely, there is no problem at all. You must’ve heard about Robin Hood? Yes, Robin Hood from German, Till Eulenspiegel is a kind of Robin Hood and what did he do? He would go from a village to another with a rope and a pole, he would balance it and walk, the children would watch. I look it myself, I view myself as Till Eulenspiegel, I balance myself without losing the character, without giving up myself, but one must know, one must know...

The *Dervish Teqe*⁴ is my first neighbor, the museum [corrects himself], the mosque...on this side, there is the biggest Serbian Orthodox school, *Bogoslov*, it is even bigger than in Serbia. Then again, the mosque, the church, then again.... We talk to all of them, mix with each other, have conversation...but, life shows us how people should talk to each other. They should talk to each other. Nobody can change this, the holy book of Jews doesn’t change the holy book of Muslims, the holy book of Muslims doesn’t change the Bible. It exists.

Besides that, there are millions of questions which we should all answer. The Cardinal from the Vatican came to Pristina one month ago. I talked to him and he said, “Do you know that there are three religions in the world?” I thought about Islamism, Christianity and Judaism. “No,” he said, “One

⁴ *Teqe* in Albanian, *tekke* in Turkish, is a lodge of a Sufi order, in this case the Bektashi. It is inhabited by a Cheikh or *Baba* and by dervishes.

is ‘Shinto,’ the Japanese, and the other is ‘Hindu, Vishnu,’ and the third are ‘Abraham’s religions.’”
When a Cardinal from the Vatican says this, then this is the truth, the truth.

Jews don’t eat pork, they practice circumcision and so on...Muslims as well. To be totally honest, Jesus was a Jew who created Christianity, but he is also a saint to Muslims as well. It is difficult to understand these things, but such is the reality.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us something from what you’ve been told from your mother about the Jewish community in Pristina? How was it organized, where did they go to school, where did they live? Can you give us such information?

Votim Demiri: Yes. My mother was in a Jewish school until she turned 18 and she also went to the gymnasium.⁵ She had a... there was a... life in Pristina, as she told us, was normal, a normal life until the beginning of the Second World War. Things got worse after that.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How were they organized? Did they have their own schools?

Votim Demiri: In the municipality, I mean the assembly, they also had their shops, houses and...they were organized, but...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In which parts did they live?

Votim Demiri: {raises his eyebrows as a sign that he didn’t hear the question}

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In which part of the city did they live?

Votim Demiri: Which part? There, where the theater is located now? The street behind the theater. The part behind the parliament, there is a kebab shop *Sarajeva*, I guess that’s its name, all the houses in that street belong to Jews. In front of the *Swiss Diamond Hotel* there are some houses of Jews that still have the signs of David inside. I went there to see them. But they had a normal life. But the world has overcome some challenges that were harmful. But, my mother felt, my mother and the others who remained in Prizren felt calm and well for remaining in Prizren. Even to this day, we, their children continue living here.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you raise your children?

Votim Demiri: My children... one of my daughters lives in Israel. She works at the Airport of Tel Aviv. My older daughter lives in New York and works at the Kosovo Consulate in New York. And two

⁵ A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

granddaughters live here with us. My son is also married and works for a bank, he has a daughter. Life is moving slowly. Let's see what we will do next.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you have any family story that you would like to tell us? Something more interesting to you, something you would think is more characteristic. I mean, something about these photographs, something you remember, that we wouldn't think about asking you... do you remember anything that you were part of...

Votim Demiri: Let's say, {points his finger to one of the photographs} women who lived in that period, before the Second World War, had the same way of dressing almost like all the other women of Kosovo, look at the way of dressing... But the religion as such, is an issue of the heart and the acceptance of these rules. That doesn't mean anything, you don't have to change and look different when you go out in the neighborhood. You should accept your life with the neighbors, people from your town and...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you say, is it me or did you say that you remember when the second Synagogue was torn down?

Votim Demiri: I remember. I was 17. It was the time of socialism here. My mother and my maternal aunt cried. I didn't exactly understand the situation, what was happening, but I remember that. I was 17. But living in a secular system, there was nothing, according to me, dramatic. They tore down our Synagogue, I couldn't understand it back then.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you know whether there was objection from the community?

Votim Demiri: Yes, of course there was, but the back then the system wouldn't listen...There were mosques that were turned into warehouses, churches as well...one Synagogue...there was a different system. But, somehow the issue of religion has returned now, but we all are trying to have a red line, until where the religion reaches and where the secular state begins. That is very important. Everyone can keep their religion at home, but you have no right to impose your religious thoughts to the others when you go out. One should accept the human as human. There is no other way.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you know until when the Boxing Club was available? In function to communities? The one in this photograph?

Votim Demiri: {points his finger to one of the photographs} Yes, that one...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Until when was it used?

Votim Demiri:... that was recorded, it was recorded in 1929. And it existed until the beginning of the Second World War.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And it was transformed after that, right?

Votim Demiri: Yes. Then another whole system came and that building was given to the Boxing Club. But now the system, the political establishment of Kosovo, I am talking to almost all of them, with those from the Parliament as well as those from the office of the President...they want to compensate us, and because of that, they have decided to give us a building in Prizren for 99 years, so that when we have guests or any holiday...I didn't accept for the building to have a religious connotation, but instead, make a museum which will show the closeness between Albanians and Jews. That's how it was accepted. We are in the phase where we will do it.

We have held some international conferences, here {shows a photograph}, they also came from other countries, Jews from other countries came and...The goal is to show that Albanians were towards Jews...There is no country in Europe that can take pride for the increase of the number of Jews during the Holocaust as much as the Albanians. This is the reality.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What are your relations with organizations that deal with the information about Albanians who sheltered Jews during the Second World War? There are some I guess, organizations...

Votim Demiri: There are some organization, I am talking to some of them, the most powerful among them is *JDC*, the *Jewish Distribution Committee* [English] in New York. Their subject is the [Jewish] heritage, and we are talking to them. There are various organizations. We became members of the European Jewish Parliament and *World Jewish Congress* [English], and there is an organization of Euro-Asia, the yellow one there {shows the photograph}, they have accepted us, we are talking, and we talk together about problems when we face any.

But all the conversations are in the form of spirituality, not with money nor...We haven't knocked on any door asking for money or anything. Never. And now, for the construction of this building, I told Kadri Veseli, should I mention it? "If you have decided to give it to us, then repair it the way it should be done." There is no door, no windows nor anything... "Repair it and we will take it." But, they will do it themselves.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How big is your community today? How...

Votim Demiri: Currently, there are 56 of us.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you identify them?

Votim Demiri: {raises his eyebrows as a sign that he didn't hear the question}

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you identify them? How did you find them?

Votim Demiri: There are 56 of us. We regularly celebrate the Saturday's holiday, the *Shabbat*. But there are some norms there. It cannot be done without eleven men attending it. But we do the *Shabbat*. When Jewish holidays come, we celebrate them as well. But we celebrate other holidays in restaurants now...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Ok.

Votim Demiri: ... we gather and go to the restaurant. It's fine, it's fine. I don't know if I was able to say enough, but this is the situation.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What are the backgrounds of other members of the Jewish community? Are they all from before the Second World War or did they come earlier, or later, or? I mean, as far as you know, knowing that you see them in gatherings?

Votim Demiri: I think that the situation for Jews is better now than it was before. I think that it is better, because the Law for the Kosovo Religions is part of people's personal freedom. And when law exists, then that is a freedom nobody can violate. But, life goes on. Let's see what will happen (laughs).

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Ok. Thank you very much!