

INTERVIEW WITH NIKOLA JOVANOVIĆ

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Duration: 136 minutes

Presenti:

1. Nikola Jovanović (Speaker)
2. Marijana Toma (Interviewer)
3. Milan Petković (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

Marijana Toma: Today it is July 11, 2017, an interview with Nikola Jovanović. Nikola, I would ask you to tell us your birthdate, birthplace and something about your childhood and the family you were born in.

Nikola Jovanović: Hmm, I am Nikola Jovanović born on September 7, 1980 in Peja, I am the second child. My brother Dragoljub is two years older than me. I lived in Peja until '99, right, until the bombings took place. I don't know what to say about my childhood. I finished elementary and high school in Peja. I went to high school exactly at the time, I mean, during the war, so we didn't quite go to school in the second half year, but...

But, besides this, all that I remember is only the apartment in which we lived. We had lived in another apartment before that, but I don't remember it because it was when I was very little. I remember the apartment on Muharrem Bekteshi Street, I don't know what the street is called today but I know that it is located near Ramiz Sadiku Elementary School. This is how it was called before I left, then it was renamed after Desanka Maksimović. I don't know, I went to preschool twice, yes. First because I was very hyperactive at home, I couldn't stay in one place and the second time, since I couldn't enroll in the first grade, I went once again to retake the class. I remember that I felt ashamed for redoing preschool, but then I was a *vukovac*¹ at school and everything that came with it.

I don't know what I remember, as far as childhood goes, I remember the carelessness, I remember how we lived in those buildings. We had a beautiful yard where there was a children's band. I remember, compared to how my son is growing up nowadays, how we could go out and play in front of the buildings without being afraid of the cars or something else. We had everything here in the yard. We were, yes, this was very specific, there were really a lot of children in that neighborhood, and I remember, I guess that was the reason why I never had a special connection to my brother, in the sense of getting along and growing up together, he had his own team and I had mine since we had this at an early age, each one of us had at least ten-fifteen friends in the yard. And so after that, we all went in our directions. I remember that we had everything in front of the building, a basket, soccer and

¹ Serb.: *Vukovac* is a colloquial way to refer to elementary and high school students whose average grade was 5.00 at the end of every school year. Students who showed such success were awarded with diplomas holding the name of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, that is why they were called *vukovac*.

volleyball. We made them all ourselves, we put them there, we stole the pillars from Electro-Kosova,² we cut nets and made everything ourselves.

My school was right behind my home and this was great. It had a big and beautiful yard which we bragged a lot about. It had a soccer field, a big volleyball field as well as a small park, and so on. For me, this was great when I was a child because I could run home during breaks to eat and then return. I don't know what else to add.

Both my father and my mother worked at Zastava.³ My father is a car mechanic and my mother a chemist. She worked in the laboratory of Zastava for oils and lubricants, while he was one of the managers and directors, to be honest, I don't really know. I know that he maintained the archive for some time and later when he started working for another firm, those from Zastava would call him for help regarding the archive as he knew all of it, he knew what was where. My grandmother lived with us, yes, my father's mother. She took care of us as children, we didn't go to kindergarten. Then my brother and I went to preschool.

Our apartment consisted of two bedrooms, one kitchen and one living room and something else, but it had enough space for everything. The building in which we lived was a four-floor one, there were two, yes, two apartments on each floor. There were four apartments belonging to Albanians and four others, I say, to Serbs. What impressed me as a child was that we never locked our doors, literally, we grew up in each other's houses. Albanians were in front of us, my brother and I grew up in their apartment, and later when they had little children, they grew up in ours.

I remember this as well, now this is something...later when everything began, the war stupidities and people started emphasizing details that they are like this or that, I don't know. I remember for example, they never caused any trouble to the little Valon who would eat pork at our place. I don't know, because a child is a child, when they grow up they will decide for themselves what they want to be. Yes, it was the same for us, the only problem was that I mistreated their daughters in order to make pancakes non-stop because I loved them and I asked them to make them, and when they would refuse to, their parents would shout at them, "How can you refuse?" These are the problems that I remember, these are the problems of a child in Peja, in such a neighborhood. Sometimes we would make noise and someone who acted like the leader of the Building's Council would come to us, I know that we never had one, but he acted as if he had that position, he would come and chase us, shout at us, I don't know, some parents would discuss. But childhood reminds me of a kind of carelessness.

I also remember this, that later, when I started riding the bike, maybe I was ten or eleven years old, I don't exactly remember, but I remember that we went to the Peja Bath by bike with one of my friends. There were fifteen kilometers to there, nobody stopped to ask me, even though to be honest I don't know whether my parents knew, but nobody controlled me either way. The understanding...we never had the feeling that we had to be afraid of something, how to say, it was very late when all of a sudden they told us to be careful, alright. This is what I remember from my childhood, I don't know what else to say.

Marijana Toma: Peja, how did Peja look to you at that time, from your perspective?

² Now *Korporata Energjetike e Kosovës*, Kosovo Energetic Corporation.

³ Yugoslav car brand, FIAT-based. The cars were used by the police at the time.

Nikola Jovanović: It looked big from that perspective...Now, I believe it was half the size of Zemun, I don't know. But it was big. I remember that at that time it was...especially for me who was used to having the school in front of my home door, and when I enrolled in the gymnasium,⁴ I now had to go to the gymnasium, I don't exactly know how far, but I guess it was one kilometer and a half. I was like, who will go there? It's so far. I have to go to school and back everyday.

Peja, we always loved Peja and generally, Peja is like that, small, back then we still...back then when we were in elementary school, we constantly organized mini-trips. We would go around Kosovo by bus, here there, in caves and I don't know, Prizren. I don't remember all the places we went to, but I know that we always were proud of how beautiful Peja was. And since my mother is from Mitrovica of Kosovo, we would spend the summer and winter there, some days at our grandparents' and maternal aunt. And then I remember it [Mitrovica] had the industrial gray. We always joked that they first saw birds after Trepča stopped working and they couldn't see them before because of the polluted air. Mitrovica was very urban with high buildings this and that, while Peja was somehow small, adjusted, and beautiful. There was only one high building which we simply called the high building, it had more than ten floors, I don't exactly know how many. Other buildings were five-six-seven-floor ones and we really liked that and the view of Rugova.

While we were still in the gymnasium, we liked escaping classes and going to the Patriarchate and whenever they allowed us, if we managed to lie the sisters of honor to sell us the famous sweet wine of the Patriarchate which is in fact the only red wine I can drink, because I don't like red wine but it is somehow sweet and I liked it. And when you would walk beyond the Patriarchate under the river of Bistrica, I mean these are very beautiful details to which I would have the pleasure to return, and when they ask me, "What do you remember?" This is what I remember.

And I remember the Karagač park, which is in the city center and on a hill by which we often passed when we went to the basketball hall from the city center. This is something else that I remember, the basketball club, I guess this is the reason why I loved basketball and why I still follow it. Since there was the basketball club Buducnost [Future] of Peja, which had a really good team especially those seven, eight last years where the whole local economy joined the initiative, Karići, Rajevići, Labovići,⁵ they all gave money and made a club which went from one league to another, we would travel with them, yes, as fans, as an organized group. I remember it with pride, there was a short but beautiful text written in a newspaper, "Ultra, giga, mega fans," this was very great.

I remember as well, yes, the one that is near Peja which I only had respect for later, when some terrible people burned that part, the old part of Peja which was called the Uska [Narrow] Steet and this is the part where the market and the mosque which used to be a church is, we heard thousands of stories about it, that it was a mosque before it was a church and so on, but I don't know what the truth is. But the whole old historic part which was protected by the state, I remember it very well because it had a spirit... Only later when I lived in Istanbul, somehow all the paths and the *bazaar* reminded me of it, *bazaars* always remind me of it, it remained in my memory. And yes, the flow of black water, which for example flowed through all the city just as Dunav-Tisa-Dunav that came together. When I think about it

⁴ A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

⁵ Famous businessmen families in Peja before 1999.

now, I would never allow my child to go near it, never. We would dive in it, but we often passed by it and fell on it, how was our feet skin not torn apart by the trash there. But, it flowed in the city and people would fall on it. This has remained in my memory. I don't know what else, this is all.

Marijana Toma: You told me that you went to school in '87?

Nikola Jovanović: That's how it is, I was born in the '80s, yes.

Marijana Toma: The school was called Ramiz Sadiku?

Nikola Jovanović: Ramiz Sadiku.

Marijana Toma: And then the name was changed. Did you go to school together?

Nikola Jovanović: Yes, we went together in the first two-three years, but in different shifts. I mean, we never had mixed shifts. They told us that it was like this simply because the languages were different since most Albanian children didn't speak Serbian and they said that this was the reason. We went in different shifts and when I think about it now, I remember that we didn't say Serbs and Albanians, but those of the other shift, I don't know. Somebody scratched my seat and I would wait for them after classes to see who they were and explain some things to them that they cannot do something like this in my seat, I don't know, like this.

We learned in the same way, I don't know, I don't remember whether it was in the first, second, third or fourth grade but at some point we learned in Albanian at school, in one of those years. I don't remember whether it was a pilot program, I was very little, but I remember the bad luck of a teacher who didn't remember how the bird is called in Albanian and something like that. I mean, totally out, I don't know... I believe the idea was to learn something that would unite us, but it was very badly carried out.

Then I don't know which year it was when Albanians separated from the school and made their own. I remember that this wasn't clear to me. My family is an old Peja family. My grandfather whom I never met because he died when my father was fourteen, was an embroiderer. And I remember because I've been proudly told this story a thousand times, that he embroidered the mantles for the Monastery of Dečan, which was a big honor for that time, this is the reason why my brother and I were baptized there. I mean, an old family who, I mean, we grew up in this kind of environment and in a family where, I mean, I really never knew who was an Albanian, Turk, Roma or Serb among my friends, I really didn't.

I didn't even know who was a Serb or a Montenegrin, only when I left Peja did I find out that we had a divide between Serbs and Montenegrins. I didn't understand, now what is a Serb and what is a Montenegrin, what is this? And so, I have some friends who have moved to Belgrade and speak the Montenegrin language. Eh, yes, we had a kind of accent down there in Peja, which was close to the Montenegrin one, so what? These divisions happen later, or people choose them, I don't know, just like I chose to lose my accent, yes, yes, let's say, let's speak in the Belgrade accent, I don't know.

But what I wanted to say is, I remember that we lived in a multiethnic society, a lot of friends, old family friends, I know that we never had the feeling that this is from that kind or that is from another

kind. My father spoke fluent Albanian and didn't force us to learn it, but at a certain point he made clear to us that it would be good for us to know it since we live here. Unfortunately I never learned Albanian, I understood it because we simply got along with this and that, but there was more pressure on Albanian children to learn Serbian than on us to learn Albanian, and they knew Serbian. Even those who didn't speak Serbian could understand it, so we would understand each other, this is how it was. I look at this through the school yard which is the best representation of this. And yes, I remember that only later, in the beginning we would distinguish each other according to who was the best soccer player or basketball player, and not according to ethnicity. Later I remember that in '95, '96, '97 there were such divides, teams composed only of Albanians and only of Serbs, I believe that we didn't even play, at least I don't remember that we played matches against each other, but we were divided in the school yard. They play there and we play here, like this.

And back then I honestly didn't understand what was going on. You hear voices from the side, I mean but it all started one moment, I don't know, when the media reports started saying that a policeman was killed in a village and this was already in '96, '97 let's say, something like that, '96, '97. I remember this and I remember a kind of sour fear that people had. What will happen, what does this all mean? There were the demonstrations as well earlier, I remember these from my childhood, I remember that my parents told me to stay home during those two hours but I have no idea what the demonstrations were about. I remember that some Albanians had taken the streets with V [two fingers] and were passing through the streets, I remember that the police chased them in my neighborhood, but what was all of this about? I really don't know. I understand now what it was about, but I don't know the date, I don't know what sparked those protests, I have no idea.

We were very well protected in that sense, but we were also children, there is nothing else to add here. I am sure I would forget it even if they explained it to me. Later when this started to become more serious, I remember the fear that people had. At home, we never talked about that. I mean, we didn't talk much about the meaning of this all. My father showed us with deeds what opinion on all of this was...Yes, he risked his life very much in '88, '89 when from Zastava he started working for Karić, which at that time had begun its private business and offered him to become the director of their factories in Peja and I remember everyone telling him, "Don't even think about it! Are you crazy, a private business, are you crazy?" He took the risk and this helped him and for this reason we were very protected in the '90s, we didn't even think about this, the inflation. I mean, we thought about it, but not at that point where the value of the salary was two euros. He took his salary in *deviza*⁶ and this was great for us. Eh, I remember when he, yes, when he... I am confused now, I don't know what I was talking about.

Marijana Toma: You were talking about childhood, school...

Nikola Jovanović: I started to say something and got reminded of my father but I don't know why. Ah, yes, he showed me with deeds, this is what I wanted to say, he showed me with deeds that in the middle of all of this, I don't know, some parents would withdraw their children, there were cases when they took their children out of the city for several months because they didn't know and there were voices saying that Albanians would attack Belgrade, I mean, Peja, and he built the house at that time. He invested all the savings that we had and didn't have in the building of a family house with two

⁶ Foreign currency. In this case, his father was paid in foreign currency and his salary did not experience inflation, otherwise it would if he was paid in Serbian dinars.

floors and a roof. Even though he knew that we would all go abroad for studies and there was a question of whether we would return to Peja or not, but he built it so that we would have a family house and a place to return to. He built it as he was supposed to. The basement, a big floor and another, then the roof, a big yard, crazy! I remember that my parents were fighting all the time, she was trying to convince him to buy an apartment in Belgrade so that we would have a place to sleep during our studies and so on. No, he wanted to do it there and this was it. Then we had the feeling that yes, our father is the smartest in the world and he simply knew what was going to happen. Even after the bombings when people were fleeing, he stayed there making noise and working in the roof. Crazy man... he will probably laugh when he sees this [interview].

So I say, we were protected in this sense and somehow didn't have this feeling, at home we didn't speak about this being something terrible and that somebody is trying to harm us or something. Those were simply events that we thought would pass and we would continue our lives the way it used to be. And to be honest it wasn't that terrible until the bombings took place. I mean, after that time there were some Serbs and Albanians, I am talking about my peers, children who were like this or like that... There were some who got brave all of a sudden and who, one of my best friends from my childhood with whom I fought about something in the school yard and he said, "You have been under us for five hundred years and you will always be under Muslims." I don't know, I remember that we laughed a lot with that, just like now, yes. I always hung out with this group with which I don't know, we didn't have such things.... There were, I mean, I don't want to lie, we talked about this when we were 15, 16, 17, because you cannot help but talk about it when something happens around you and there were various stands and stories, but at the end of the day we thought that it had to pass and we had to continue our lives.

Marijana Toma: Who was your best friend? Was he your best friend at that time or did you have a lot of good friends?

Nikola Jovanović: Uh, most of them were good friends, we were so close that I don't know... From my early childhood, as children, there were a lot of us in front of the building. Vlado was the first neighbor, he is my age, we were friends since preschool, in fact not since preschool but since first grade of elementary school where we went together. There was Lekica, who... his parents were smart and moved way earlier. For example they went to Čačak, Aleksandar, Lekica. Later there were Vlado Samardžić and Rašo. I rarely meet with Vlado because he doesn't live in Belgrade, our lives simply moved in different directions, but I still meet with Rasa with whom now we live closer than we used to live when in Peja. That's how it happened, that I still meet him. We had other people in the neighborhood, Shpëtim was a very close friend of mine, I played soccer with him. We all adored him because he was a great soccer player and it was great being in the same team with him. Toni who died in an accident, I don't know, when he was 14, 15 was also a good friend. The little Hari, I think that his name was Hari, he was also a great soccer player, I remember him very well, but...

Yes, the building near ours, Goni who was older than us and Shpëtim's brother defended us. I remember him very well. He often defended us from those older than us who chased us from the basketball field, he often fought with them. We had a very good team which I loved very much, and I am still in touch with its members through Facebook, three Albanian Catholic brothers, three apartments, three buildings, they were in the right building, Ilir the youngest, who is a photographer and how was the name the other, Tom I guess... Ilir is the youngest, Tom is the oldest and Did is the

middle child. I don't know how his name is but Didi, he is somewhere in Switzerland now. I admired them because he dealt with music for cars or I don't know, with everything. I admired electronics and computers in general as a child, and we could always go to his place to do something, so it was great. But yes, best childhood friends, there are four of them that I cannot separate, they are Vlado, Lekica, Rašo and the other Vlado.

Marijana Toma: You often mention sport and that you liked following sport, especially basketball. Did you play any sports?

Nikola Jovanović: I tried all of them but I was... I look much different than I did at that time. I was very short, I only grew taller when I enrolled in high school, I was this tall {shows with hands} and I weighed thirty kilograms until high school. I played soccer and basketball and I don't know what else, everything that we had there, karate and whatnot but I would easily give up. I was very interested in basketball but I realized at a very early time that it wasn't for me. Especially, yes, I remember the first practice, the trainer gave me the ball to play for 45 minutes from the left hand to the right and he told me, "What do you think training means?" Alright, I realized I wasn't interested in that.

The same happened with soccer, my childhood friend Dragan who later died in the Panda massacre.⁷ He played soccer throughout his childhood and once he took me to the training, and there I realized that they run all the time during the training, I don't know how many rounds around Karagač, literally. This simply wasn't for me, I wanted to play soccer. But I liked this, we simply, we had no other form of entertainment. We had the school yard and we spent all the time there. Then cycling marks a considerable part of my life "down"⁸ there, because together with Lekica, we would fix the bicycles, paint them and I don't know what else, but we had our own games, the little nails and then we would put the elastic rope and make a kind of flipper, this and that. He always gave creative ideas in all this. He is a master, he is a born master and I always followed him and we went out with bikes together. We would simply go everywhere by bike, through the notorious Karagač to the Patriarchate, let's go through Kapešnica because nobody really suggests you go there because the bears live there, they filled our heads with these kinds of stories, and I know that biking was more important than all those. As for basketball, I fell in love with it because of the club, the fanaticism and traveling. One likes something and there we had it, if we didn't have a good basketball club, maybe I would like soccer more, I don't know.

Marijana Toma: Who was your favorite basketball player at that time?

Nikola Jovanović: Look, at that time we would mainly watch NBA through satellite and tape recordings and all that, but from our teams, Partisan was definitely my favorite, the '91 and '92 generations, Đorđević,⁹ Danilović.¹⁰ I remember, I remember how everyone loved Đorđević because of the three-point, but I loved Danilović because he was crazy, nobody could do anything to him. I

⁷ The Panda Bar massacre alternatively known as the Panda Café attack was an attack on Kosovo civilians in the city of Peja in north-western Kosovo, on the night of 14–15 December 1998.

⁸ Down is a derogatory term referring to Kosovo, meaning that Belgrade is the center.

⁹ The speaker is talking about Aleksandar Saša Đorđević, a famous basketball player on the Serbian and Yugoslav basketball representative team.

¹⁰ The speaker is talking about Saša Danilović, a famous basketball player on the Serbian and Yugoslav basketball representative team.

followed him even though it wasn't easy to do so when he went to the Kinder team of Italy, the access wasn't easy for us but I managed somehow. He was my very favorite, but there was a community, a small community [English] of people who loved basketball.

I remember our family friends, Mališić and his son Bojan who was two-three years older than me. We spent a lot of time at their place and just like me, he loved basketball and from him I collected information about the NBA and he played a big role in me loving basketball, not only to follow it but more than that. I remember that all the time he would buy games related to basketball and I would play them at his place, and if I can say it again, Partisan is my favorite team and this is it.

Marijana Toma: I would return to early youth again. You finished elementary school in '94, right?

Nikola Jovanović: Yes, that's how it is.

Marijana Toma: Or in '95 and then you enrolled in high school. This is a time when the torments in the society start taking place. Do you remember anything from that time? What do you remember?

Nikola Jovanović: I remember the first years of school, do you know what I remember? I remember that on our way to school we passed by those houses, big villas where Albanians were going to school. We didn't meet or fight or chase each other, nothing. I know that we commented on why they had to go to these schools. I also remember that at that time we knew that they chose that way because they wanted to learn their parallel history which wasn't true, which wasn't allowed and so on, that is why they decided that way. I remember similar stories, this is how they explained it to us, that they were indoctrinated with various stupidities and they were being used in order to divide Kosovo and I don't know what.

These were little things in which I wasn't interested, to be honest. I was interested in whether I had to go to chemistry class the next day or not, would I take one or not, would my father come to school, would I pray to God not to, and would he mistreat me. He liked mistreating me when he would come to school, he would bring me in front of teachers whose classes I had escaped and ask me to explain to them the reason why I had escaped their classes. Since I was a little genius with computers, those at school had bought computers at that time and I had a great agreement with the school director to guide him on how to work with the computer so that he would excuse me when I escaped classes if I needed him to and so on. I had agreements with some of the teachers as well but it didn't matter, my father was an admirer of all of this, how to say... he deeply believed in our education system, he would say, "You should finish school, university and army service, then you can do whatever you want." Later he realized that the most important thing for me was to travel the world and learn new languages and these, but it was too late, so he literally mistreated me until that time.

So, I don't remember the tensions of that kind. There were stories about them when the stories about gunfire started coming up, that or this policeman was killed. This was, I think, this was the beginning of the tensions. What I remember first is that it was really terrible and in '98 it started becoming more serious and I remember how I went to a vegetable shop, to a vegetable seller whom I had bought vegetables all my life from and who knew me, and he told me that he didn't understand me when I spoke Serbian and he insisted that I speak Albanian. I remember this, I remember that I returned home

and told my parents, “Alright, alright, there are all kinds of crazy people in this world, don’t think about it. We have another shop here, you don’t have to go to that one, you should go to the others.”

You know how Peja was... I remember especially the ‘90s, the time of inflation and all the others, Peja was well furnished. I mean, we barely lacked anything. Peja is a commercial city. We didn’t have big industries but we had the Zastava factory as well as the factory of batteries, I don’t know, but the city didn’t depend on that. Peja was a commercial city and we had everything, Peja was furnished from all sides, the vegetable shops worked, we had fruits and vegetables. I remember that we would send flour and sugar to our grandmother in Mitrovica, I don’t know the necessities, since they didn’t have a place to buy them in Mitrovica. Money wasn’t a problem, there were just no places to buy products.

And we had all those merchants who were Albanians. It is still the same, the baker is an Albanian, okay a Gorani. Here there was the market and a small shopping mall which was built where there were two Serbian shops and the rest were Albanians, but the whole market was in the hands of Albanians, if I can say this. They were all friends from my childhood, they knew me while growing up and they always treated me with chocolates, I don’t know, they would blink their eyes when they saw me throwing a chocolate in the bag so that my mother and my father wouldn’t see me. Now one of them all of a sudden says, “I don’t understand you,” and says something in Albanian. I went there and I remember the feeling of hurt and anger at that moment, not something like, “Ah, the mother of Albanian,” but something like, “Who are you *bre*?”¹¹

And here are the tensions and I remember of course that in our society we had different people. I mean, not all the families were like mine where they always told me that we were all the same, there is no difference. Our friends, what do I call them now, I remember how my father heard someone swearing on someone behind our building, he said something like, “...of Albanians!” This and that, What do I know. He told me, “What if our [Albanian] friend comes to us, will you talk to him like that? don’t understand.” And he always repeated that to me, then, various people came to our place. I mean, we didn’t have, we didn’t primarily hang out with Serbs, even though they were there. My father’s company, I mean the company where he worked Karić, there were 75 percent Roma employees and they were very proud of employing local Roma and helping them to make a living out of this, but there were also Albanian employees. I don’t remember that there were many Serbs, sincerely. So, it was mixed.

There were various kinds of children here, there were stories like, “Their mother this and that, we should chase all of them.” I don’t know. There were various stories here, which as a child you don’t get to confront. From my viewpoint, I know that I will teach my child not to confront these kinds of stories but leave the place, and I will explain why all that is wrong, but... I guess my parents didn’t think that what happened would happen and they didn’t even teach me anything. You just sit there in silence and listen to everything and all that finds a place somewhere in your memory. Luckily, that didn’t happen to me, it was never true for me, I never thought that someone was terrible just for being a *Šiptar*.¹²

¹¹ Colloquial: used to emphasize the sentence, it expresses strong emotion. *More* adds emphasis, like *bre*, similar to the English bro, brother.

¹² A derogatory term referring to Albanians from Kosovo with the aim of making a distinction between them and those from Albania.

To me it was the same, when I compare them, I always make parallels, of course this depends on the environment that you are in. Now, I was in an environment and it was like this and we all were children who had to go through that, when you are in puberty you have to get through the traditional stage. At that time we all looked like bad *dizelash*.¹³ The ugly jumpsuit, terrible. I get very concerned when I see those photographs now. Hair dyed in golden color, I don't know what else I have done to myself, but one has to go through all of this. When you are with your friends, you listen and know all the songs, at home you are something else. At home, under the influence of my brother I listened to Public Enemy and Run-D.M.C, Balašević [Djordje Balašević] whom I still listen to, but you don't talk about these things outside your home, you are different with your friends. You don't have to talk about this, you just sit there in silence. And looking from this perspective, I wouldn't do such things, but when you are a child it is simply something you have to go through.

I also remember, and this is one of the most terrible things, a little *fast forward* [English], this is one of the most terrible things that I remember from that time, I think and listen to myself and this all seems very idyllic but it is not, what embarrasses me mostly even today is when in '98 or '99, I don't exactly know, the city was, there were such things even in '99 during the bombings. The city was half empty and I remember there were fights near Peja, near Brženik, I remember that the city was besieged by various half-military soldiers like Munja and Legija, I don't know but I know that we looked at them like, we didn't know what to expect. They told us, I mean nobody told us that they were criminal groups and we couldn't understand, but they were simply special units of the police. And you look at them pretending that they are defending the city.

It was especially difficult after the Panda case, because what happened at Panda was something that shocked us. But even before Panda, the city was empty, people were mobilized, my father was mobilized and expelled from a group that... I want to say, they were located in a big house of a local Albanian rich person, and they had robbed... it was a volunteer group who were mobilized. They had robbed the *zepter* dishes this and that, and my father didn't want to become part of this and later they told him, "Let us write that you are here, but you can go home." Then he went home and was very happy that he didn't have to care about it or be there. My father was already a famous face in Peja, everybody knew him, he was a director at Karićs. Everybody knew him because he had been there all his life, his family was an old one.

And now, since the city was empty, some had already left, some were mobilized, some had... There was news that some cars full of guns were caught on the way to Kapešnica in the city center. Then people started self-organizing with their neighbors to monitor the neighbors. Now they gave the kalashnikov to some 17 year-old boy like me with a jumpsuit and a shirt under them and dyed hair, to monitor the neighborhood. And now we were a team, but always had some of the elders with us. The elders, we had some checkpoints where we stood, and ours was really...the idea was to stay there and not let anyone walk there. There was no official curfew, but we wanted people not to even think about it, we wanted them to know that there were checkpoints.

Eh, those people wouldn't know whether we were children or not. Maybe, I think that if they knew, maybe they wouldn't pass by that neighborhood because a child is capable of everything. And I remember this, on one side I say, it seems interesting because you are simply a 17-year-old child and

¹³ Rich people who had gotten rich thanks to the deregulation of the economy during the '90s. They were characterized with a distinct way of dressing, mainly with sport expensive brands.

holding a gun is interesting to you. I remember that my father told me, “Go, you have to. But don’t joke around and shoot by accident, don’t even think about it, if something happens, just lay on the floor.” I don’t know. We would stay at the checkpoints and some wanted, if somebody would pass by, because one heard that some people had forced Albanians to do push-ups on the fences. There were terrible stories here, but there were, I don’t want to misrepresent, there were boys who really explained it to us that we shouldn’t joke around, we are waiting here, this will pass and we will return home. In the morning we had to wait near the kiosk until the bread came, take the bread and return home safe and sound.

That time was really terrible. This is... I get chills when I think about it, because I remember how we go and all of a sudden you hear a *krak* {onomatopoeia} and they all stand up and you don’t know what it is. Simply your head is full of thoughts and you save something from someone. You have no idea who you saved it from, but you saved something from someone and now you hear something and I mean, there were such cases, it was terrible. I remember once we were walking around a building and one had found a canister here, I wasn’t sure who he was, I didn’t know what it was. There were Albanians and Serbs in that building, was someone provoking us? Were any Albanians mad that they threw it there? I remember someone shouted, “Come out, your mother!” It was really terrible.

I mean, later when I thought about this, I pushed this in my memory, I forgot about it and one day I confronted it, I even had photographs. What a crazy person you must be to take photographs with a rifle. Luckily, the camera that I had was so bad and my photographs are so bad, but I know that they are from the monitoring of our houses with the guys of my age, who went through the same thing. I remember that their photographs appeared in the Pristina media, as if they were the local criminals, but in fact they were children of my age. Thank God, there is malicious media on both sides, but still, when I think about it, you take photographs with rifles. How childish can you be...

And I remember how I felt bad, because in our building, I am talking about the bombings now, because this was during the bombings. This happened mostly during the bombings in fact. Before that, there was something but I cannot remember the date, there were bombings, I know that most of the people from my building had left already, I am talking about Albanians. And I remember now that my parents at that time, I mean, first friends, my father’s colleagues and his relatives slept at our apartment and then my father helped them to move somewhere else.

Then the elders from the first floor, Aziz and...I forgot the name of his grandmother, they wanted to leave and I simply remember how we blocked the entrance and we didn’t allow them, we didn’t allow “ours” to enter. I mean, by ours, I mean, they are not ours, we didn’t allow them to enter because they would go to clean and then check who was in the apartments. They [Aziz] simply didn’t want to go and he said, “Kill me here, I don’t want to leave. I am eighty years old and I have no other chance.” Then we brought them food and everything else. I remember these difficulties now. This is an interesting side because together with your team you carry rifles, I mean, you know that nothing is going to happen, you carry the rifle and then you remember this, you think about how you had to wait until the morning in order to get a piece of bread and a jar of jam, I mean this is cognitive dissonance. One doesn’t know what is happening. Now I know what it is, but I also know that it is called cognitive dissonance, I know it now, but back then, I didn’t.

And I remember our neighbor Dašić from the second floor, he was well equipped with weapons and was close to the police, he was always mobilized, I remember how I met him. I was sending them food and I met him at the entrance, he asked me, “What’s up? Where are you going with the food?” And for one moment, I didn’t know whether I should tell him or not, I simply didn’t know. Even though I had known him for my entire life, I knew that he was a good man, I knew him, I admired him and everything else, but I don’t know, I simply wasn’t sure. I remember he came to my house and said, “Hey *bre*, the fact that I am wearing a uniform...” wanting to tell me to wait, to stop. And this is what we thought would happen when we leave and Albanians come. During the bombings, my parents took me...they wanted to take me away of the rifles and such things, they took me to my brother’s in Belgrade, he was studying and working there. They took me there and it was one week after, since the telephones wouldn’t work most of the time, they sent him a letter which I read on the bus, because they didn’t want to keep me there, they didn’t want me to leave. Where was my logic? Belgrade was being bombed while Peja wasn’t. They had destroyed everything they could, Karagač, the barrack and this was all. Belgrade was being bombed non-stop and I felt I was more secure in Peja. But of course they had other thoughts and I only realized this later, and one week later, I found transport and returned to Peja. I stayed there until then.

Marijana Toma: Alone?

Nikola Jovanović: Yes with a friend from Peja, whom I knew had come and wanted to return right away. He had driven a soldier to the hospital and wanted to return right away and I went with him and returned to Peja. But I have to say that this was normal for me, I mean, for me, I didn’t know Belgrade, I don’t have anyone here. I have only one of my best friends here, Vlado Lončarević who was injured in the Panda case, he is the only one here and that’s all. My family is “down” there, for God’s sake, I am from “down” there and that’s it. Then I returned and enrolled in the faculty “down” there, a few days before the signing of the peace agreement, because since we didn’t have any communication, we didn’t know anyone who would tell us when and what, we knew that it would pass and that I had to enroll in the faculty. It’s simply this time. And I came here with two pairs of shorts and three t-shirts, and stayed like that. Then my people sent a car for me, with some photographs and clothes and they stayed there.

My father was convinced that nobody would touch him because he was an old Peja resident. We helped our neighbors, now they will help us back. But what they didn’t take into account was that in Peja no resident would return but somebody else, so my family was kidnapped for a whole week. They didn’t send them to any other place, they kept them at their own house. They didn’t know, now this is good luck in a misfortune, my father was famous and one of those who crashed into his house, he cleaned and he knew him, and I guess they thought that they could gain something that is why they kept them there. Fortunately, there was no physical mistreatment, even though they made it dark and my family heard the noises coming from the front of the house, people being beaten and I don’t know what else. So, there was no physical mistreatment, but there was psychological mistreatment. My mother gets worried even today when someone hits the table.

They managed to get out of there, I don’t know this for sure, my father never wanted to talk about it, but I guess there was money involved in all of this, some purchase, something like that. They never want to talk about it. I believe, these are my personal beliefs, that Karićs paid since he was their person, he was their friend and so on. I am connecting the dots like this, since for them, one of the

closest people of Sreten Karićs had come, his driver during the time they were living “down” there. And they told them that you have half an hour to disappear from here and they packed everything and got on their pick-up and left, they went to the factory since my father kept everything there, my mother’s golden jewelers and some money, I don’t know, savings, everything. But they didn’t manage, they made it to the factory but there they saw people with rifles rushing towards them and they sat in the car and came here, this is all.

Marijana Toma: The same people that had crashed into their apartment?

Nikola Jovanović: No, they weren’t the same people. They were different, I mean, there was another confrontation, I don’t know.

Marijana Toma: Were they wearing uniforms?

Nikola Jovanović: No, no, they were, I don’t know now whether they were wearing uniforms or self-organized groups. Maybe they had coverage, I don’t know, but they were wearing masks, they were horrific. They had cleansed the neighborhood, just like “ours” did when they went from one house to another, from an apartment to another, cleansing and I suppose, stealing. It is the same, just like when they took my father and said, “You will remain alive if you give something from your weapons.” My father didn’t have anything at home, he had a gun which he kept locked because he knew that something would happen and then he told them that in the factory, he had the security rifle. Alright, you have to give something. And then he drove them, and this was marketing, he drove him all around the city so that others would see that...

In fact it was the alarm, “Pop Milko,” who is he? Now he is in Belgrade, in Bežanijskoj Kosi [a neighborhood in New Belgrade]. He is the famous ninja, “pop Milko,” we all admire him because he is very unconventional. He wore the uniform and saved people, literally took people out of their houses and went with those from UNMIK, respectively with the forces that were there at the time, he went there with them and took people out of their houses in order to save them. He alarmed everything that was alive and then they told me that it was also written in some newspapers that they were kidnapped, I don’t know. But, I didn’t know about it. They hid it from me. Even my close friends knew, Rašo, Vlado and Trbo knew about it. They came to my house everyday and asked me about them, “Did you talk with Mira and Rajko?” “To be honest, no, why?” “No, we are just asking.” And one day I told them, “Hey, I talked to them, they are coming!” Meaning that they escaped. “How?” Even my brother knew, but they all hid it from me, because they thought I was alone and I wouldn’t know what to do. But alright, I guess they kept it hidden from me because I was a child.

Part Two

Marijana Toma: You mentioned Panda, then you mentioned your friend Dragan who died and Vlada who was injured.

Nikola Jovanović: Who was injured, yes.

Marijana Toma: You were 18 when it happened. Do you remember anything else?

Nikola Jovanović: I was 17, it could be that I turned 18 at that time. We are talking about December 1998, I had just turned 18. I remember, how can I not remember it. I mean, Panda was our favorite coffee shop, since the first year of gymnasium because the coffee shop is near it. We all went there, that was the place, the *place to be* [English]. And for New Year's Eve we would go to a party, but first we would go to Panda for coffee and then there. In the morning, we would go as early as possible in order to have coffee before the first class. We would open it because we knew where the key was. Its owner, Suki, gave us the key and we would go there and adjust the place. We would light the stove and prepare everything so that when he came, he would just start working. We went there almost, almost everyday. This was our place, the place where we spent our afternoons. We would spend our afternoons and evenings there even when we had no classes, because that is where we watched the matches, played cards, *lorum*, *firz* and everything else. We made jokes there, I mean, we lived there, it was our place.

And then, I didn't go there that day. It was sociology that I always hated from the bottom of my heart that saved my life, because I had a one grade,¹⁴ which I had to improve before the end of the term and I had...Let's say, I hated my professor, not sociology, she didn't lecture on it well. I liked sociology later through my work, but that day I stayed home to study. And I remember it as if it was yesterday that we played Sony PlayStation and I don't know whether we talked about going or not going there. Almir, Jašarović, the one who said, "You have been under us for 500 years." Almir, Dragan who was there for a short time, Trbo and I and I don't know whether there was anyone else there or not. No, Trbo wasn't there, Trbo was at his own house. Then we talked about going there, I don't know, "I have to study, it might be that I will join you later." I remember that I was home and I talked to Trbo, "Are we going or not?" But he had to study too, "Let's talk later." That was all.

Then, I mean, somebody called those at my home and asked them whether I was there. My mother was like, "Yes, he is studying." "Please check whether he is in his room." She said, "Yes." And then he told her, "There was a massacre in Panda, we don't know what happened. We know that there were shootings and most of them are injured." And no, I was about to shed my skin open. At that moment and the following months I felt like a traitor, literally. Because we were together every day, we did the same thing every day together, and suddenly, I wasn't there. And this is...this kept haunting me. From this perspective, I know that I would immediately go and talk to a professional, a psychologist, psychiatrist, but back then this wasn't a common practice. After some time, those in my family sent me to Čačak at Lekica, to clear my head for some days. But I remember that I didn't know what to do with myself. I would go because I didn't know who was there. We didn't have mobile telephones, I don't know. I wanted to run to Dragan's house but I didn't have the courage, because I had no idea. I had no information, I didn't know anything.

And then we started getting news one after another about how many people were dead and injured. News about how a car was driving so fast, how a car went with Sveta, then he died on the operation table or in the car, that Vlado Longar was injured, that he was shot by so many bullets, that they didn't give any chance to him but he survived nevertheless. I guess he was shot with 15 or more bullets, a part of his bone missing {explains with hands}, so he carried the fixers for a long time, I don't know.

¹⁴ Grade F on an A-F scale (Five-0)

I mean, later we found out everything and it was shocking. I remember that I was sitting and staring at one point, nothing, I had no emotions, only emptiness. And I think that I only cried for the first time after the funeral. Yes, yes, I only let myself go after that, because then I realized because until then it was somehow...I mean, everything was organized. We were, yes...I didn't tell you, the funerals were very well taken care of and very well organized, because in summer '98, somebody would die every day and there were funerals every day and everything, and help was needed at the cemetery every day. We went there, whoever had time, to serve, to help, and we were all very well coordinated. Then when the funerals of my parents took place or those of my relatives, I didn't go because I couldn't see the cemetery or the customs of it.

Now all this organizing, I remember we were all trying to be useful and it could be that this helped us to handle it somehow. I believe so, everybody was telling us to be quiet, to help and deal with this or that, there is no time for bad thoughts, you should not get revenge now, I don't know because I didn't have such ideas. But somehow, we got the news that those from our side are looking for everything, these persecutions I don't know. And it was, I remember this funeral with many people who had come from all sides, all this funeral, I mean, there were a lot of people, but when everything is over, the next day you are left alone and I don't know.

I am sorry, it is difficult, I can't get very deep into this topic. I haven't thought or talked about it for a long time. Of course I think about them each time I look at photographs and each December 14, even though it's been a long time since I didn't go to the church, I go on December 14 and light a candle for them, think about them and everything, but....But I mean, the idea is that all of a sudden you...I mean, my childhood ended at that time. That is the moment when my childhood was over because you cannot think about it, there is no way out from there, where were we supposed to go, to school? What school? Who cares about school!

I remember everything, this was the second semester, this didn't exist. In the end, I admired history and I wrote my *matura*¹⁵ paper on history with my favorite professor. He loved basketball just like me and was a great *grobarčin*,¹⁶ and that is why I loved him and previously I had written something about Napoleon and so I already had...But we didn't have to. At the end, they gave us the certificates and like, "Congratulations!" But I remember how sad it was when we went to school to receive them. We had to pretend that we were happy about finishing school.

In the end we didn't even have a *matura* evening. We only organized it later when one from our generation, Raja, Nikola Rajovic who was also in Panda at the time when it happened, even though he was happy, he wasn't injured. He only had something stuck in his fingers. Since he had the opportunities, he organized a *matura* evening on the 18th anniversary. We had the *matura* 18 years later. And he organized everything, now he organizes it every second year, he pays for everything. In the first time we were at his hotel in Velika Plana, then some years ago we were in Thessaloniki. He organizes everything, the bus and the accommodation, he pays for everything, we just have to gather. And that is the time when we get together as much as we can. This is really beautiful and at least he makes it possible for us to be together, if nothing else. Every generation had an end of school somewhere, each time, they had something. We were the cursed generation who had nothing.

¹⁵ *Matura*, a set of examinations given to students after the eighth year of elementary school (High school graduation).

¹⁶ Serb. *grobarčin*, grave digger, is a colloquial term referring to the fans of the Partisan soccer team in Serbia.

Marijana Toma: And after Panda, I won't ask you anymore about it, but...

Nikola Jovanović: Feel free to ask me, the moment is a little...but alright, I think we should talk about this.

Marijana Toma: This is one of the events that little is known about, and there are many stories and somehow it keeps being unclear and untold, this is one of the first crimes that happened in Kosovo. What were the first reactions? You talked about it a little, of course...

Nikola Jovanović: Yes, there was no doubt from us that this was done by Albanians. They were simply masked people, soon the information came out that the weapons and Kalashnikovs were Chinese, because they were jammed, those who survived told us that the weapons were jammed, that is why they didn't manage to shoot all of them. We simply knew that they were Albanians and that's all. There is nothing else, nobody knows who or what they were. It was supposed that this had happened because of the events in Košare, and we all thought that it was because of that. And the police immediately left for the big action in Kapešnica, I don't know, there was information about people being arrested, but simply, nobody had any idea who it could be.

And then, I remember some years later I went to Sutomore, since the family, the parents and the family of the late Dragan live there and I went there to visit them. Then his mother told me about when they were being expelled from their house, they stopped and saw who they were and told them, "Get out, but you will be surprised when you find out who killed your son." And now she had that information, she had offended them, "How can you..." this is spying....But when later on you hear something like that, that there can be a chance that it could be *UDB*,¹⁷ now when I look at it, I cannot believe it. And I cannot believe that even the worst people existing, are among us... people who were organized by the Serbian state "down" in Kosovo, to do many things, I still cannot imagine that they attacked in order to kill children. I mean, alright, OK, they could throw a bomb in the city center, I don't know, shoot with bullets and I don't know what, but children? I don't know, everything is possible, of course.

I would really like, in fact, what irritates me most is that the prime minister who is currently the president, says that there can be a chance but he doesn't know, it is not known and it would be something very big if it was published. I think that it should be published. I believe that neither he nor anyone else can understand the troubles it caused our setting. When I say that I was troubled by it, I can imagine the parents of the victims, how troubled they were, because I am saying, at the end of the day, they killed children and this should sound relevant, but it isn't. Understanding that your state killed your child, I don't know, this is the end of the world. I don't know what to do with myself.

So, I can say everything was horrific, everything that followed was horrific for me and my friends, we didn't get through it with anger. I mean, we were already feeling anger, we were just looking like that alright, now suddenly they are separated in two sides, Serbs against *šiptara* and this is it. Now we were pretending to defend what was ours, they were pretending to attack it. I mean, I don't understand this divide between what's theirs and ours. It would make sense if an American attacked us and we said that this is ours, we live here. When we all live here, mine, NATO, ours, I don't know. But OK, I still feel sorry for back then, that we didn't collect our forces, Albanians and Serbs against Belgrade, to demand

¹⁷ *Uprava državne bezbednosti*, State Security Administration.

that Kosovo take what belonged to it, the economic autonomy and everything, investments, I don't know, because this is the only suitable solution for the people.

But of course they were, I remember on the way to Pristina, to Mitrovica, the villages on the side. They look like villages in Asteriks, Obeliks, with high walls and everything. There are many stories about them, that people don't go out for years, that only one of them goes out to buy necessities and returns, I mean, these are crazy stories, but there were such opinions, where I believe there was very low education and it is easy to give rifles to those people and say, "Eh, let's go and occupy them because they are oppressing us," I don't know. When I think about it as oppression, because nothing Serbian entered the village for fifty years? Local customs, we don't talk about Kosovo or Serbia or Yugoslavia customs, there is no such thing.

But now I say that a kind of anger existed because of the Panda case, but I think it didn't exist. I believe that we were shocked for a long time. Nobody could do nothing to me anymore...and there was fear, there was a lot of fear, I remember this, because I felt it too. My father, I don't know, he will find out if he ever watches this interview, I hope not, that I carried his gun in my bag. Because when I went out in the evening, not during the day, only in the evening, I know I carried it with me because I don't know.... Simply, I felt more secure, I kept it here, it had no bullets, I don't know. When I think about it now, I don't know how I would take it out, I don't know, they could kill me three times, but I don't know, I felt more secure.

Now when I think back, you are a child, 17-18 years old, who carries a gun in his bag and goes around the city. The idea itself that I was in such a setting and that I had to do such things terrified me. I mean, the only thing that I can maybe say is that I blame my parents, even though OK, they couldn't or they didn't know better. I would never put my child in my position. I would pack everything and leave, not to Belgrade, but somewhere abroad, forever. I simply don't want to be in such a setting. Looking at it from this perspective, all of this made me stronger, yes, it made me more independent, of course. I don't know, when someone expresses their prejudice against this to me... prejudices, what kind of prejudices do you have? You are from, I don't know, from the village near Kragujevac and you have never seen a foreign person in your life, you have prejudices against Germans, Turks, Albanians, Americans. What kind of prejudices are you talking about man, you haven't seen anything, you have been by the seaside somewhere and that is all.

Now I am really hurt by this, but I would never do something similar to my child and if I saw something going really bad, that there are chances for something like that, I would buy the plane tickets and *Ciao!* A luggage and I wouldn't care about anything else, at least I think so, I don't know. I would never allow my children to grow up like that, it would be better for them to be spoiled Americans or Germans or whatever, than experiencing what I had to experience.

Marijana Toma: You told me earlier about the bombings and what that all looked like, the rifles and everything. Do you remember anything else from the past, something before that? You told us that your father built walls around the house and lived with the belief that it wouldn't happen. I...

Nikola Jovanović: Yes, he built the walls during the bombings. He constantly worked on the walls during that time. We laughed at him, crazy person! Because he was like, "This will pass, they won't attack Peja." One time we heard the sirens, in the beginning and at the end of the bombings, because

the planes were flying over Peja all the time, so we didn't have any reason to escape to the basement, I don't know, this is all. I remember that the only thing we lacked at that time was tobacco. Eh, yes, you hear that there is tobacco just near the Brženik. And then you go there by bike, and I remember that I went. There is the big cantonment of Peja just across the Brženik street, which was bombed, I don't know how many times I passed by that street, I went to the house of my friend when it was attacked. Everything moved, literally. And this was like, "OK, maybe I should've been more careful." But there was nothing serious after that.

There were different stories before the bombings, because international supervisors were in Kosovo, I don't know what they were called, UN or something like that, I don't know, but I remember they were there, and I also remember that it was the first time I drove a car, those were among my first times driving. I always had...I told them that I am unlucky because the bombings began just when I started driving, the second time when I started getting my driving lessons in Belgrade, the school was closed and I didn't want to do it for a long time because I was unlucky. I remember that when I started, my instructor said, "May God make it possible for this to finish soon." Meaning that a lot can happen. One who lived in the same house with him, I mean, he had rented the house to him, told him that something would happen and they had to leave, meaning that something would begin.

I said, "Alright, OK, what can we do?" And we didn't have that...there were stories that nothing would happen, and even if so, what could possibly happen? Is it bombs, invasions, is it a kind of war? We had no idea what kind of intervention that would be, but we knew that there would be something. Not even now, I mean, now that I have experienced the bombings, I can know and I can say whether they were big or not, but back then we had no idea what they were, what kind of bombs, I don't know. I remember that we stayed there after the dinner, of course, we all know the moment when they started, where we were, what we were doing, and I remember that my mother and my father watched a stupid TV series, I don't know whether it was Turkish or Spanish, I don't know, one of those television drama. And I remember that my friend Vlado Vicinić knocked with a belt as if he was going to the war, "The bombings are about to take place, let's go to the basement," I said, "What?" And then they started. I think not much happened in Peja that night, nothing really. My father said, "If you want to go behind the building, do so. They won't attack the buildings." And then there was a kind of excitement, it was something, something happening, and then when they took place, there was everything.

On the first day, it was a bit of an unpleasant situation because they attacked the Karagač radar in the center of the city, they also attacked the cantonment but there was nothing special beyond this. Yes, they attacked the hills around Peja, since the bunkers from the First and Second War were there, and they thought there could be something else, that is why they attacked them, I don't know. And that was it. Besides that, it was mainly quiet in my city. For us, of course the deserters were a serious problem. There were various deserters who would come and hide here, yes they were hiding. They weren't deserters, I don't know, good children of their mothers and fathers, but they were deserters who had stolen money and now they came here to open shops. Those were the ones who caused us more problems because we didn't know what could happen and who we would get to deal with.

And somehow the city changed, people had left the city. This is where I started to understand that there were so many Montenegrins in Peja. Until then, it was simply just us. Most of them had gone to Montenegro to visit their relatives. Those of us who stayed there, to be honest, it was very boring. We didn't know what to do, often there was no electricity nor water for days in a row, the telephones

didn't work at all. We communicated with each other only when we met, we had some meeting points, we gathered at houses, I don't know, friends who lived in the skyscrapers, Albanians who had escaped had left the keys to them and we would gather there. And yes, they had a big television and we took the cassettes and watched movies and I don't know.

Our life was mostly about whether we could find tobacco to buy and that was it. It was very boring and horrific. It was super boring, we didn't know when it would take place, but of course there were stories about where they had attacked, it happened time after time. Since there were the paramilitary measures, The Peja's Munja¹⁸ and those of Legije, I don't know. They would come to the city time after time and leave, that was it, we would look at them and had no idea who they were. Sometimes an army would pass by, sometimes not, I mean, it was boring. We would sleep for most of the day time because during the night we had to do crazy monitoring. This was something really...the Peja brewery was still working for some reason. I don't know whether it worked in full capacity, but I remember that the cistern would pass by at 6AM and it would stop to fill the big bottles with unsterilized beer, and then we would carry them home. That is the best beer that can exist, the one from the cisterns, all frozen. These are some of the details.

The other part of the story, the sadness. I remember when it started, I remember the car queues. It left its marks on me and I think about it but I don't like recalling it because it is very emotional. I remember our friends from the neighborhood whom you would see in the queue but you don't dare and run after them and hug them, and you don't dare greet them because "ours" who were controlling the queue could beat and even shoot you, I don't know. I mean, they wouldn't shoot a child, but what do I know. And now you stand and stare how someone whom you grew up with is walking in the queue, man! I mean, it is terrifying, what now? You get some information that a part of them is leaving, that a bus was organized, that they were going, I don't know, then we got the information that they decided to go themselves, I don't know. I don't know, if you think about it now, those who saw the queue it was obvious that it wasn't their wish to go, let's not lie to ourselves. Yes, some didn't want to stay because they knew what could happen to them, but I mean, let's not lie to ourselves, they didn't go because of their own wish.

There were stories, I don't know, near us, near the Banana which was a big market, the whole company was called the Banana, a grandfather went near the Banana and said, "I cannot go!" And they killed him immediately and left his corpse there. I didn't see this, but these are stories that I remember and they are horrific. It was here and the reason why we didn't dare to get closer to them was because there were stories that those from our side who got closer to them to give them bottles of water were beaten with batons and so on, "We have organized everything for them, why do you have to get closer?"

These are horrific things I wouldn't want to happen to anyone, because I am saying, I absolutely don't care who started it, I absolutely don't care about which is the cruel side here, I absolutely don't care about who is right or not, or whether Kosovo has to be independent or not, it is absolutely irrelevant.

¹⁸ *Munje* were local police units operating in Peja and its surroundings, near *MUP* [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] of Serbia. *Šakali* was part of this unit, even though there are still disagreements about this. *Šakali* operated within the *Munje* unit. Vitomir Šalipur was the commander of this unit until his death. This unit is responsible for the massacres of Albanian civilians in the village of Qyshk in May, 1999. Source: *War Crimes in Kosovo*, Human Rights Watch, 2001.

They destroyed my childhood and that of my friends, family and everyone from my setting, I mean, they have destroyed a beautiful part of my life.

So, as for me, especially in Peja, I really don't know anyone from Peja, anyone from the Albanians in Peja who would like to have war or something else because the whole economy was on their side. The whole market was maintained by Albanians. Who cares that they [politicians] change something here? What do they have to change? They all build houses, I mean, stupidity. And then you have to expect yourself to allow... to express an opinion on whether Kosovo is independent or not. I think that this is a very irrelevant issue, so irrelevant. What I care about is that now when my father goes to Peja, he started to go there several years ago, he goes a couple of times a week to a Peja Residents Association. I care about him being safe "down" there, I want him to be able to go to Buçuku to eat kebab. I want him to be able to go to the bazaar and meet the guy from whom we had bought cheese for all our life, and the Rugova *kajmak* [cream] and I don't know, I want him to be able to walk to the Patriarchate and back on his own.

But I don't care, I really don't care, I am totally open, to me it is crazy that somebody wants to create a nation in the 21st century. I mean, the nation as a concept, borders as a concept. To me it is a crazy thing, I can understand that you want more rights and a better life and I know that an amount of uneducated people from both sides can benefit from all this story, but having people from both sides who nowadays think in terms of who was the first who came here? Or who does all this belong to? I don't know, or three hundred years ago, was this a mosque or a church, or was it first a church then a mosque? Or, life being directed towards the nationality and belief that you have and ideally are connected to both. I cannot understand this, I really cannot. It bothers me so much that sometimes I don't find the meaning of life in this region where the discussion whether you are safe to go to Pristina or they are safe to come to Belgrade is still so important and talked about.

Our friends often visit us in Belgrade, when they come here for visas or something, they come to visit my parents, some are Albanians, some are Turkish, it doesn't matter, the thing that matters is that they live in Peja. And now, this whole concept will take time. Even if Vucic shows up tomorrow saying that Kosovo is independent, the conflict will still last because there is no willingness for reconciliation, just like we still have stories about whether Srebrenica was genocide or massacre, whether there are eight thousands or three thousands of people. I am really disturbed by these crazy discussions in this region, it is not that I want us to get together because we are Yugoslavs, no. I don't want to destroy the nation concept, absolutely not. Let's ask the belief, religion to get away from public life, for it to be an individual matter that has no influence on anyone. And when I say, those who follow me on the internet know that I am a critic of SPC¹⁹ and everything, but by this I mean that I am a critic of all beliefs, religions and everything.

These concepts in the 21st century are unbelievable to me, I get angry when I talk about it. Maybe because these concepts are the reason why I don't have a house in Peja, where my father built everything he had since forever. This is the reason why I didn't stay "down" there for a long time and why in the end I don't have all the friends I grew up with. I mean, now we follow each other on Facebook, that's how we find each other and try to compensate, but there is silence for months. We compensate, we like each other's photographs, but we don't talk. Now I look at it from my corner, I don't know how to address them, what language to talk to them in, one doesn't know whether they

¹⁹ Serb. *Srpska pravoslavna crkva* - Serbian Orthodox Church.

still speak Serbian because twenty years have passed. I don't know what to say. I don't know, soon we might gather and slowly meet and find out how to talk to each other.

What bothers me mostly is when I think that I didn't choose this, somebody else decided to estimate that we have to fight "down" there and that... that Albanians are cruel, or Serbs among Albanians are cruel, not Slobodan Milošević,²⁰ but they themselves should expel them. That is why I was very aggressive in communication about this topic, expressing such opinions and a number of Peja residents have stopped talking to me, and nowadays this is not done through politics, but they *unfriend* [English] you on Facebook, most of them think that I am too liberal, a traitor to the Serbian nation and so on. But these are mainly people who connect their belief to the nation, as if it was their identity, an important part of their identity which is something I generally am not against. OK, I am against the nation and religion, but I am not against the idea that it is part of somebody's identity. But this being part of me is crazy. Look how many worlds you have, man, you only have one life and you are spending it dealing with who came to Kosovo first, who cares? Go research a bit in Thailand.

Marijana Toma: I will go back again, you mentioned the identity now. An important event in one's life connected to the identity, you mentioned when you left Kosovo, when your parents sent you to Belgrade, but you returned. This is June, '99.

Nikola Jovanović: Yes.

Marijana Toma: What did Belgrade look like for you? What do you represent at that moment in Belgrade?

Nikola Jovanović: Eh, what am I? Still a tourist. I came here to enroll in the faculty and return.

Marijana Toma: Sorry, in what faculty did you enroll?

Nikola Jovanović: In the end, I ended up enrolling in Trading and Banks at BK,²¹ because first I wanted to enroll at FON,²² I wanted to study Political Science. I wanted to study journalism and this at the same time, at FON, and during FON, I also wanted to study IT. On one side they told me to enroll in Pristina, and the order from a higher level came that they cannot accept me. I was consulting for student services, "I want to study..." "No, no, no, we have an order from the higher level that nobody from Kosovo can be accepted."

And I stayed for some time then I enrolled in the Faculty of Trading and Banks, simply because it was the Faculty of Karićs, the faculty that was literally conceived at my home because it was supposed to be in Peja, then everything started in Kosovo and they moved it to Belgrade together with the Faculty of Management. And then the dean, who in a friendly way, I mean she was at our apartment in Peja many times, everyone in student service was from Peja, and I decided to enroll there. It is not that I wasn't interested in banks, but I never finished that faculty, I just enrolled in it. That faculty gave me

²⁰ Slobodan Milošević (1941-2006), Yugoslav leader whose ascension to power began in 1987, when at the Communist League of Yugoslavia's Plenum he embraced the cause of Kosovo Serbian nationalists and immediately afterwards became President of Serbia and revoked Kosovo's autonomy.

²¹ Serb. *Univerzitet Braća Karić* - Univerziteti Vëllezërit Kariq.

²² Serb. *Fakultet Organizacionih Nauka* - Fakulteti i Shkencave Organizative.

something better. It gave me the opportunity to become part of AIESEC,²³ the student organization that opened my horizons and brought the prejudices that I thought I didn't have to an end, it gave me the chance to create some of the best friends I have today, and I also met my wife there. I am so happy with my choice, because if I was at FON, it would be a question whether I would be able to become a member or not. They had more people from these student organizations and I don't believe I would be able to become a member like I did by being here.

To me it was confusing, you know. I was here for one week and I spent the whole time with Vlado Lončarević, the one who was injured, we went to the bath everyday to do electrotherapy, to revitalize his hand nerves because he was using the fixers and everything else. So, I spent time with him and we were neighbors, we stayed close in New Belgrade, I was living near the municipality and he was living here, near the fountain, I was living near the municipality. Then we went using the bus number 78, I remember this, "Let's go to the bath and get baked in electricity," we joked about it. Then we would return and this is how I experienced this with him until the time came for him to have the surgery in order to take out the bullet, I don't know, everything, it was horrific.

I remember that I got lost once before that. Now the Youth Brigade 2, the building near the round-up, I was looking through the window where to go, I go in the direction of the McDonald's and get out of the building and go in the opposite direction, and this was very difficult for me and I needed time to get used to it. I had to start working immediately. I enrolled in the faculty, simply because I had no particular wishes for my lifestyle, simply because I needed the money because my parents couldn't afford it financially.

My father came, he didn't want to impose himself. I mean, back then, Karić helped a lot of people who worked for them as well as some who didn't work with them, friends, they tried to employ them wherever they could just so they could help them. My father didn't want to impose himself, even though he was one of the most important people "down" there. At some point, he found a job, it wasn't a high position, but it was a job he was happy with, he had a good salary and so on. Of course, my mother didn't work, she stayed home, she also had offers to work in laboratories but she really wasn't ready for anything after the kidnapping and everything else, so she stayed home and I had to work. And this was also at Karić in the design studio, which for me was a *dream job* [English] at the time, because I dreamt about becoming a designer. I was more an obstacle there, let's be honest, I did some PowerPoint presentations, this was all for some time.

Then I quit the job and I also worked in the government of Đinđić,²⁴ in the Agency for State Security, in a lower position than the one who deals with blankets, I carried paper, but back then the director Sonjica Bruno noticed something in me, and she somehow mentored and directed me on how to develop, this and that, and I am still thankful for that. And here I was at the same time working, studying and part of AIESEC, it was an overkill. Fortunately, I decided to choose AIESEC and work, and I was actively engaged in both, *full time* [English]. I quit my work at the agency when we were working in the big international congress in Serbia, to me it was very difficult because I was never recruited, because that is how I lost...

²³ *Association Internationale des Étudiants en Sciences Économiques et Commerciales* [International Student Association of the Economic Sciences]. AIESEC no longer is used as the acronym, but as the organization's actual name.

²⁴ Zoran Đinđić, the first prime minister elected in a democratic way in the Republic of Serbia, 2001-2003.

And I remember how it happened in Peja, they would come to school and those who were not recruited, had to go and show up themselves, “Tomorrow you have to go to the cantonment!” And I went in the meantime, it was Saturday, and if I found today the soldier who told me, “Eh, today it is Saturday, there is nobody here. But, listen to me because you will thank me in the future. Don’t come here anymore! Are you crazy? Escape the military service!” And I never showed up, I am so sorry that I didn’t take his name so that I could find him and treat him.

For me it was a big problem because I couldn’t be issued a passport, back then a document from the military was needed in order to get a passport, and I couldn’t travel. The good thing about AIESEC is that with it you can travel around the world with little money. You have accommodations in every country, travel expenses are covered and everything else. At some point, I managed to go to Canada, it is important, and then we organized the big congress in Belgrade which for me was a full time job. I worked even without money, but we were promised a kind of salary because the budget was very big.

And then I was at various conferences of cities and municipalities, I started from “down” there, I took papers out of the printer, I maintained the IT network, then I also founded their department. The working groups for the IT directorate in various municipalities and cities, and so my career became relevant but I realized it wasn’t what I wanted to do and so I through AIESEC I went to do an internship which was actually a full time job, in Istanbul in the Middle East office of Microsoft and Africa, where I dealt with socially responsible employment, with CSR [Corporate-Social Responsibility], of course with the region from Pakistan to the Southern Africa, a fantastic position.

And then, I was so stupid that I returned home, I even insisted to return and my director didn’t allow me, so I even made something up and I have to explain this to her some time, to tell her the truth, I made up an explanation that I had to get leg surgery in order to return to Serbia, because she wouldn’t allow me. She even wanted to pay me even though she knew I had not finished my faculty and I needed one year of experience in order to be employed as a manager, so that she could pay for my executive master’s at the London School of Economics in London for CSR. I knew that was a good opportunity, but I thought there would be other opportunities. I returned to Belgrade to open an NGO dealing with socially responsible employment and here I faced our wall in the NGO sector. I didn’t know that you have to know people in order to get some money, no matter the project.

Then I acted stupid once again by turning down another position in California at *Hewlett-Packard* and then I ended up dealing with human resources which is what I still do. I was part of ERSTE local bank, then ERSTE Group, at their corporate university and I have been working as an adviser for five years now, I deal with digital media, human resources, organizational development, cultural organizing and such things. But I have to say again, the real thing is, if I didn’t come here the way I did, and if I didn’t enroll in the faculty the way I did, if I didn’t join AIESEC the way I did, would my career which I am very happy about, be the same? I wouldn’t like to repeat myself with the childhood details.

Marijana Toma: I would also like to know about your parents, when did they come to Belgrade?

Nikola Jovanović: They came three days after the signing of the peace agreement. They stayed there, the first, the second day we sent them the car “down” there. We sent one of the cars through a friend, we filled it and one of our friends drove it. This was fitting for them because they had one free seat in

the car so that they could pack more things. They packed photographs, some luggage with clothes, they stayed there wishing to remain. My mother was very convinced by the idea, "Let's go!" While my father was more like, "Where are we supposed to go? This is ours, mine, I was born here. My father was born here, my grandfather. How am I supposed to leave?" As if he was eighty years old and not... My father was a little blind, he looked at everything through rose-tinted glasses and then what happened happened and they came after three days. I mean, they were imprisoned, I don't know how to call it, five, six days, I am not exactly sure about it. And they simply sat in the pick-up and came to Belgrade.

Marijana Toma: What happened to the property?

Nikola Jovanović: With the property? Yes, my father managed to sell everything in the end. Now this is... one of our previous neighbors with whom I grew up took the apartment. But there are some interesting stories. Not to go into details, but the father [the older guy of the other family] was arrested and they found a list. This is how they were organized back then before the KLA²⁵ showed up publicly, that's how they functioned even in prisons and everything. They found the list at his place, he was arrested and my father went there to take him out of the prison because it didn't make sense to him, "Do not arrest my neighbor, are you crazy?" My father used all of his connections and they told my father, "Alright, we will release him but he has to disappear from the city." They found him which we were also part of, it was a list of people to be executed in case the war breaks out. Literally, he was supposed to kill us. I know he didn't have that kind of mindset, we grew up together. But he had the list, and he disappeared after that, he simply left, wherever he... but it was him.

His son Ramiz who I admire, who was a role model for me during my childhood. He was tall, strong, big, smart, he organized us, I don't know, a great character. He was a high commander in KLA, I don't know. After the war they went to our house and stayed there for a long time. We didn't communicate with them at that time, we only found out later when the organization of UNMIK or I don't know who, dealt with our property and they told us that he was in our apartment and we said, "OK, at least we know who he is," and nothing else.

We had that apartment, a shop that was in the garage after the building and my father turned it into a shop just like everybody at that time did. In the end they destroyed it, he couldn't sell it because they destroyed it and build a pavement there, what else, we had that house which my father unfortunately had built for all those years. And in the end we sold the apartment, simply some man wanted to buy it and we solved it through attorneys, we sold it for very little money, but it helped us return the loans because we were already in Belgrade.

We were in one of the apartments that was owned by Karićs, so we were only using it and at some point we had to... it was small, but it was good and I am very thankful to them for this, but we had to get out of it. And now, my father did... my father had many connections and did well by many people for many years... and some of them were coming back to him to help him. So, he bought some land for very little money, or for free, I am not sure. He started building the object, downstairs from which there is a shop and there are two apartments fifty square meters upstairs. Then we had to adjust it very quickly in order to get out of that apartment. He borrowed some money in order to adjust the apartment, and then the money from the apartment in Peja was helpful because we returned the loans and we deposited some of it in the bank as savings.

²⁵ Kosovo Liberation Army - *Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës*.

They built the house again, how to say, the house was almost finished. Literally, there was only one week work left to do, the heat was to be installed and we were supposed to move. They rebuilt everything, because the heat system was stolen, they had taken everything. In the end, my father sold it all, the house and the land, for little money. He resisted it for a long time because it was his, this was something that connected him with the life “down” there, but at that moment he realized that there was no turning back. There is no turning back, let’s not lie to ourselves. Maybe he hoped that some time before the end, before his death, he can go “down” there. I don’t know what, but we live in Belgrade now, and if we go somewhere else, we will go somewhere far away, there is no turning back “down” there.

Marijana Toma: You told me that... I guess your life is divided between Peja and Belgrade, with AIESEC, travels and everything. In fact, I wanted to ask you, how did you meet your current wife?

Nikola Jovanović: To be honest that is how it is. I am not sure if it has to do with all that I have experienced in Kosovo, or would it simply be the same if I came here to study. I don’t know because I believe that in a way, this has to do with my interest. It is not that now I, I think, OK, I don’t go to gather the Peja residents because I don’t care about that. I like to meet my friends, but I can meet them even beyond this topic, but I can meet and hear, hundreds of people ask me, “Hey, did you sell anything ‘down’ there?” I cannot... but this is something I cannot avoid.

It is true that I meet and am in touch with many people, especially with those from my generation, from school. Since the time Nikola Rajević started gathering us, we have become much closer to each other and we get along, even though our children are different ages, some of the children are studying. So, I believe our worlds are not separate, but simply my closest friends from the time of my studies and AIESEC, and generally from different workplaces. I have been working since 2000, so I have many colleagues and so on.

I met my wife through AIESEC. She used to lead the office in Nis, I was in the Belgrade office and we met through the organization, I was engaged as a mentor to help..and I spent a lot of time “down” there, but back then we were really friends. Only later did we... in fact, when I went to Istanbul for the first time, that is when we started seeing each other. She came to Istanbul for a conference, and we started there. And the following years, this was my sorrow, because I was in Istanbul for one year and a half then I came to Belgrade, then she went to Paris for one year and something, and I traveled constantly.

At that time, I was working for the ERSTE Group and I used this. I always joke about the fact that I haven’t paid the loans for all those flights, but every cent was worth it. And when she returned from Paris, we moved in together. If it wasn't for AIESEC and my studies, I am sure we would never know each other or meet, she was in Nis, I was in Belgrade.

But there is an anecdote here. Her father, I mean even when we were not together, long before that, I was in Nis because of AIESEC and I had slept at their place because usually whenever we travel, we sleep at someone’s. And back then her father joked a little, “Now, there are no jokes, you have slept at our place and you have to marry her.” And I took it seriously, so... there is another anecdote as well, her father had told her and her sister, “Do whatever you want, don’t bring a Kosovar nor a Montenegrin

to my house.” Because there are many Kosovars and Montenegrins studying in Nis and they are perceived as very wild. And look, one of them is married to a Montenegrin and the other is married to a Kosovar.

Marijana Toma: Now you have Filip, who is...?

Nikola Jovanović: He is two years and a half old.

Marijana Toma: Two and a half. You told me earlier that there are chances that if you go to Kosovo one day, you will take him too. And I would like to return there once again. What is the first thing that you would teach your child about Kosovo, Peja?

Nikola Jovanović: Yes, I will tell him that it is the best place with the best beer. That’s it. To me, and I say it, we always joked while we were “down” there, we had nicknames for those coming from other cities and we always made fun of them, this kept us together, we were more progressive than them, we were the West for all of them, and we were de facto the West of Kosovo. And there was a kind of culture which I see even today when I meet such groups, you often see how people get along with each other simply because they come from Kosovo. And simply people who just like them, have been through the same things, get along much easier. While for Peja residents, they only get along with other Peja residents. They don’t get along with anyone else from Kosovo, only with Peja residents. Such is our culture.

And I believe that if I ever take Filip with me, I want him to notice this first, that Peja is a really beautiful city, with a view from Rugova, the Peja Patriarchate, which is a special place. I remember that when I was a child, it seemed strange when they told us that people from different world countries come here, from different religions and pray, not because they were baptized there because to be honest, it doesn’t matter to me, but simply because it is a special place of culture and history, if nothing else.

I am not even thinking about a particular history, but history is created there. It is a phenomenal example of how things should work, at least in what way you should try to integrate in the local community. The Republic of Kosovo is irrelevant just as well as the Metohija or Serbia Republic. When I take Filip, it will be this part, Peja, Deçan, Prizren, which is the most beautiful city, but for me of course it is the second most beautiful city, and that’s all.

Marijana Toma: Is there anything that you would like to add?

Nikola Jovanović: I don’t know, generally I say, I mean I would like to... when I think about it that I had to come here and do this, I didn’t know what to expect from this, I didn’t even want to prepare for this, wait, I should talk about this or that... but I realized that no. I wanted to let you take the lead, and I think it is better for these to be my memories. Everything that I said is very subjective, seen from my angle. Maybe some things that were important for me and I... that is how I remember them.

I think that it is important to talk about it, I think that it is important for us to listen to each other’s stories. I mean, to see that we all went through similar things... because I still have friends from Peja who come here, I told you about it. And you listen to their stories. It is not that “down” there it is milk and honey, they still experience terrible things. The threats, that’s how it is when you have your own

business, our friends are all businessmen and you have to pay a kind of ransom. These are some KLA Veterans Associations and you have to pay. Otherwise, they can criticize you just for being so, and they can throw rocks at your shop and everything else, the pressure is very big.

And I find this very interesting, that you see a kind of nostalgia on their side. Let me say it again that these are people from Peja, these are our people. They weren't the people that thought about whether Kosovo had to be independent or a state and that it is worth going to war for that. These are people with whom we lived together. Now they miss us just as we miss them. These are friendly connections. I want them to be given opportunities, just as I was given the opportunity to tell my story, people should have the chance to tell their stories because we don't have many chances to talk to each other.

It is usually the governments or organizations that talk about it, the Serbian organizations are considered traitors in Serbia and same, such organizations from Kosovo are considered traitors in Kosovo. And this is not good, I mean, it is not healthy and this should not... these organizations are important, right, because they collect data about those who went missing and so on, but I believe that many other ordinary people should be given the opportunity... I don't know in what form, not to turn to that topic now, but I believe that this is not the only way through which we can understand that we are actually the same, that our governments mistreat us in the same way, that we go through every election process, there is nationalism here and there and this has brought nothing good to anyone. They block us because of this, especially those in Kosovo with the passports, visas and so on. We are not very limited in the sense of visas, but there are many prejudices about us because of everything, that is why I think as much communication as possible is needed and this is the only way to move forward.

Marijana Toma: Thank you very much, Nikola.

Nikola Jovanović: Thank you!