

INTERVIEW WITH VALDETE IDRIZI

Pristina and Mitrovica | Date: May 14 and 28, 2017
Duration: 167 minutes

Present:

1. Valdete Idrizi (Speaker)
2. Erëmirë Krasniqi (Interviewer)
3. Donjetë Berisha (Camera)

Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:

() – emotional communication

{ } – the speaker explains something using gestures.

Other transcription conventions:

[] – addition to the text to facilitate comprehension

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

[The following parts were conducted in Pristina on May 14, 2017]

Part One

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Valdete, can you introduce yourself and tell us about your early childhood and what you remember from that time?

Valdete Idrizi: I am...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Everything. Family...

Valdete Idrizi: Yes...

Erëmirë Krasniqi:...*rreth*, tell us everything.

Valdete Idrizi: I am Valdete Idrizi. I am from Mitrovica. I had a pretty active childhood. How...I was born, I grew up in the Northern part of Mitrovica, in the center of the city in the North, in a mixed environment, ethnically mixed environment. I am the daughter of a miner and I have always been proud about that, simply, about the fact that I was the daughter of a miner. I wanted to...Maybe it is better to say that it is a label, because it is something I held with pride, I mean I really considered it as a value. Because I grew up in an environment where my father told me not only about his work, but while he talked about his work and the mine, I simply learned to love and acknowledge the beauties of our country.

On the other hand, he would tell me about the solidarity that miners in the whole world had for each other in different years, and how they supported each other and how connected they were. Later when I grew up, this was already confirmed. And this definitely always made me proud for being from Mitrovica, because Trepça, as everybody knows, was known as one of the main giants in the former Yugoslavia. Now, with it being one of the biggest giants, we simply had the chance to meet people from various cultures who first came there to work and then even to live. Or they brought their families and raised them, they created their families there.

So I grew up in an environment with the spirit of diversity, and simply, that diversity was considered to be a value when we discussed in the society, in the city, in school and in the family. Various religions and cultures. So, that is why I believe that my identity as a person coming from Mitrovica always made

me feel good because we simply adapted to other cultures very easily, whether they were from Kosovo, I mean from other cities of Kosovo, or people came from abroad or...So we adapted to them very easily.

And we often joke about it and say that the fact that we even managed *gjakovars* feel comfortable and at home, it speaks about it that we must have something special that made them feel good. Because there were many professors, many professionals in different fields who first came to work and are still very respected in Mitrovica. So, I grew up in a big family. We were eight children. Yes. I am the fourth child. I mean, I had very good friends. My school was five minutes from my home, or from my building. I always lived on the third floor.

During the long break at school, I would often go home and hear the school bell from there and run to school. We often said that maybe the greatest benefit of growing up in a big family is that we had everything, the theater, sport and every kind of game at home, because there was a difference of two years between each of us. So, we...I remember my childhood with nostalgia but also with a lot of love. Even though, economically we were in a bad situation.

I mean, I had to wait for my sister to finish school to take her jacket because we only had one good jacket for school, we didn't have two. We wanted to look good, especially in middle school when we began to grow up. But, this never made feel us less important or something. But however, it was simply a practical approach. And first I am thankful to my parents for this warm environment that we had at home, also my brothers, sisters, and the wider family. But, also the *rreth* in which I grew up, that was the *rreth* that was called *te Berilet* [at Berilet], in the city, in the northern part of Mitrovica.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us a little about your close family? About this big but close family?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, I have...as I told you earlier...except our youngest brother who unfortunately died from an accident, he was crushed by a car when he was very little, five years and a half...the others, seven of us are alive. Some of them are in Germany, some here. My oldest sister Vjollca still lives in the North [North Mitrovica], she returned after the war. Bardhyl, my other brother, lives in Germany. Driton is the brother who taught me mathematics because he is the alpha-omega of mathematics. Linda, my sister who is two years younger than I, then Arton and Burim, two of my younger brothers, one of them lives in Germany and the other in Mitrovica.

This is the benefit of having a big family, because although some of them live abroad, however we have...We still have a very strong connection, as it was when we were little. We supported each other. Of course we fought, and had some periods when we didn't talk to each other and then started talking again, just as every child does. But, in general I mean, my mother was somehow like the pillar of the family, the one who was always there. For everything, for the good and the bad. Even though I was very closely connected to my father.

My father died before I turned 21, at the time when I felt that I needed him the most. He was my best friend in life. He encouraged me the most, of course, my mother too, to participate in other activities outside school. Because I went to the first grade right after I turned six, because I was a dynamic child. I started participating in additional activities outside school right away in the third grade. And not only did he not stop me, but he always encouraged me to go.

I know that in the beginning, as children, we would wear a red cross on our arms and collect money to help poor families. We would send it to the Red Cross. It is understood that they would give us instructions on how to be kind, how to be patient with people in the street, the kind approach. And that is how one learns communication skills at a very early age. Then in the drama club at school. I was in the theatre group, then I was engaged in theater for 17 years after that. And I proudly was the Little Red Riding Hood of the school. Maybe I was always a little more chubby, short and dynamic.

Eh, back then in our school, the Hivzi Sylejmani Elementary School, which I told you was very near my home, we would organize once a year, I mean we would organize like a parade, the main schools of the city [did that]. We would choose a fairy tale and improvise a scene of it, on a very big truck. And our school chose Little Red Riding Hood. I was Little Red Riding Hood. I was nominated and supported by everyone. When I say all, I mean that the school was ethnically mixed, Albanians and Serbs. Even though they said that the competition was very strong, I didn't apply because I knew. My art teacher thought that I could be a good Little Red Riding Hood.

And I remember when the cameras came close to me, I was right in front of my apartment building, and I didn't know whether to raise my head to look at my mother and father or not. They asked me, "What is your name, are you afraid of the wolf?" I know that once I made a mistake and said, "I am Valdete Idrizi, huh, no, I am Little Red Riding Hood" (laughs). And I never managed to watch myself on television (laughs). Because our television didn't work and we had no chance to see it. But it doesn't matter, the important thing is that I still remember that scene. And my mother saw me and felt very proud of me. On the other hand, I was a little shy, you know, as a child. So, I have always been engaged in activities within school, but also outside it, whenever there were any.

I wasn't one of those girls who played the bride's game from one building to another, because there were such girls. I would go sometimes, but I never played the bride, so (laughs), maybe I did, but I don't remember, because I consider...I don't know, I don't remember. But there were various activities and I always wanted to do something something different and my family supported me. And that is something I am very thankful for. Because I wouldn't be the person I am today if it wasn't for the freedom they gave me to simply do something or contribute to the public, the city or the people. And this always made me feel good.

And today, maybe even in moments when I don't feel good or...because all human beings have their own moments...I always go out. There are many activities to do, and your morale and energy rise immediately. And by getting energy, you reflect energy to others. This is how I grew up. I remember that part with much love.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Since all your work was for the community and in the community, and you told us that the society was very multicultural, can you tell us about how was your contact with all these people? And somehow you took care of their needs. Can you describe this kind of life with people of different ethnicities in a more detailed way?

Valdete Idrizi: If we go back to my early childhood, I mean, even though the city was ethnically mixed, when I began to grow up, I mean, in my adolescent years and I mean, even when I was older, suddenly the situation began to get worse. I mentioned the miners strike earlier, you know, which attracted everybody's attention and I mean, activities and streets began to be completely separated.

Even the *korzo* was different in Mitrovica. There was somehow an unwritten rule about where Albanians were allowed to go and where Serbs were allowed to go.

And even though there was no change among our neighbors because we had grown up there, and we had exchanged greetings, as we grew up, a kind of fear began...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Of all of them?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, of all of them. And you didn't actually know where it was coming from, even though we were so confused, we didn't know, we simply didn't know what was happening. On the other side, we had learned it in the history class, I mean even the elders had always told us earlier that we had to be careful, for example, even though the war began in Croatia, my brother was serving in the military at that time. He fortunately left, he deserted and went to Germany. But we started feeling the fear and we started being more careful, because in Kosovo it didn't begin so openly.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Why...you must remember the miners strike of '89? Can you tell us how, how was the city? Did you feel pressure from what was happening in Trepça, in the city, within the city? How? Whatever you remember?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, it was, I especially remember it well, because my father had problems with his back and he was at the spa of Banjska at that time, that bath was very famous. And, as soon as the strike began... he had retired temporarily, no, ahead of time because he was sick, later he also passed away... but I know that he left the bath and went to the mine, simply, I mean, with his actions and with what he told us, "It is necessary, now or never." We knew that they were determined, something was happening and they... I mean, the situation, I don't know. For us youngsters, it was somehow unclear, you know, what was about to come.

But on the other hand we had force. Because when he says, I mean, when your father goes, when they all gather together, and with our previous history, we heard before, we had an extraordinary trust. But on the other hand, even when we went to school or out in the streets, I don't know, [there was] a kind of calm. A negative calm in the city. A kind of tension. And, I don't know, a kind of lack of safety, I mean, was created and we reduced even the activities outside school. We did them indoors or in the classroom, or some of them at home.

So, we already started to feel the pressure. At this point we didn't, we weren't old enough to read all the news and know everything that was happening, we simply knew that we, as Albanians, must be more careful now. And I mean, we were also careful with what we said, especially to other Serbs. And with people, with people from other classrooms, in the same school. The separation between Albanians and Serbs began. And later this, even in school, I mentioned it earlier, also in the *korzo*. You knew the coffee shops, exactly where I lived there were a lot... the music was, I mean, Albanians and Serbs listened almost to the same music. A very good music, I mean all good... but we wouldn't go to the same coffee shops anymore...

Albanians in one place and Serbs in another. Even though there were exceptions based on people or their relations. I know that I never went to a coffee shop where Serbs went, because I was simply afraid, but I went to a place where I was considered more, where I considered that it was easier to go. Especially we who had politically persecuted family members, and I mean, we knew that it wasn't,

simply we had to be careful about the regime back then. And we had a kind of fear, I don't know, mixed with trust. We believed in the power of miners, that they would do something better, on the other hand, the fear and the general feeling of lack of safety for the future, what would happen... We simply didn't know. So, that time was a time with very mixed emotion. On the other side, life continued.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did your father tell you any story of the miners protest? Do you know anything?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes. I remember very well when he joined them. And he went feeling pain in his back, because he just came from the bath... he was sick. I remember how he looked like chocolate {points to her face}, covered in dust, I mean...and we would say, "Dad, you look like chocolate." And then he would say, "Come on then..." He would always say that, because I loved choco cream and chocolate, and he would always say, "Alright, you like it, so come and kiss me" {touches her cheek}. And I know that I kissed him like that. And I said, "Yes."

He didn't tell us everything in detail, but when I asked him, "Dad, can you make it? Because you are sick and tired, and you haven't eaten?" Because we had watched the news. He said, "No, *more*," he said, "My daughter, do you know how many people are there? I am only one among all those people. And nobody will, when I say..." And he turned around a little. "Nobody," he said, "the miners will never divide. And the underground," he would say, "Will move." He said, "Because we know, this is wealth, this is..." I don't know, however, that raised our morale. I will never forget the feeling I got and sometimes no further explanation was needed.

Like, like I only needed seeing him and no further explanation to understand. Maybe I was even afraid to ask more, what if something worse happened. But according to what he expressed, you know, and the part that, "It was worth it," this is how he said it. "Yes, but dad, it would not be a big deal if you didn't attend it, they all knew that you were sick." "No," he said, "I would never be able not to be with them." And so on. I know that each time they make... because I don't want to remember much the dates and the experiences about it... even when I go, because I was at the mine myself several times and I looked for my father's number. His number was 618, I went until the tenth horizon, because I simply wanted to know.

Because I would ask my father everything when I was a child. "Dad, how is this? Dad, how is that? Is it cold? Is it warm?" He would tell me, "It is cold in the North." Back then we didn't know where the North was. We would turn to various sides. So, he, I don't know...Somehow he made me believe that when we come together, we can make things move and we should not be afraid of the future, I don't know. This was a kind of strength I took from my father. Because of this, he always really made me feel very proud for being his daughter now, because he was very famous in the region of Shala especially, because he was active in the Blood Feuds Reconciliations...

Erëmira Krasniqi: Hmm!

Valdete Idrizi: Yes. He had another part, another story that, and I want to believe that I have it from him, but I am too far from...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: The Blood Feuds Reconciliations in the '90s?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes.

Erëmira Krasniqi: With Anton Çetta?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes.

Erëmira Krasniqi: Oh, how interesting!

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, yes. He was...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us something? How did he begin?

Valdete Idrizi: Unfortunately I have never been with him in the field, but he... because in the Stari Trg mine in Trepça, there were mainly workers from Shala e Bajgorës, but there were others as well...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Because they made the first call...

Valdete Idrizi: Yes.

Erëmirë Krasniqi:...from the protest...

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, absolutely. And then, having been a father for a long time, he was a person who had not finished school, he had finished four years of school, because of the financial conditions... but if you sat with him and, he was also a delegate for some time, if you sat and talked to him about various topics, he was a living encyclopedia. Because, as I mentioned earlier, we lived in bad financial conditions, but there were books all around our house.

Maybe we didn't have shelves to put books on them, but, I mean, he was a person who was interested, and the financial problems didn't stop him from developing professionally in many fields. Then, he was always a good speaker. Today, I brag about it when they say that I am a little like him. But it is difficult, if I am like him, even if I am just a little like him, I really feel very, very, very proud. Because I am joking when I say that I brag about it, but definitely yes. And now, when...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: He used his authority to reconcile people, right?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: He believed in the community?

Valdete Idrizi: He believed, he believed in people. He always loved people very much. And I got that from him because I love people very much. No matter what happened, during the war I saw people turn into whole different persons, they turned into beasts, but on the other hand I saw that people did everything they could in order to save somebody else's life. And I never lost trust in people. I think that I got that from him because he would say, "Eh, today is a very good day," he would say this when he returned home in the evening.

“Why, dad?” “Ah, two families that had been in feuds for generations extended their hands to each other.” He never said that he did it. Never, ever, ever! Only, “They reconciled.” “But dad, how?” “My daughter, people should let people talk.” And anything, he would say anything to leave room for them to freely express themselves without looking at him badly. And he would say, “When they extend [their hands], when they give the *besa* to each other, there is no turning back.”

And when he came and said, “Today is a good day,” we knew that something, I mean, there was some case that...Only later did I find out that he was pretty important in these processes. But he would only tell us that he was part of them together with everyone else. And he focused on those who reconciled, not on those who mediated. Because Anton Çetta was, I mean, an idol to all of us, especially to those from us who knew more about his work... but I mean, my father only said, “The reconciliation process...” We knew, we knew the figure, the personality of professor Çetta, but how important were the local mediators? Yes. Only later, as I said, did I find out how important my father was as well.

And even today when I go, they say, “We know whose daughter you are and whom you got this from.” So, I am, I mean, this time about the mine and the time during the ‘90s, I mean, when the pressure that we suffered from started coming to the surface...Or, sometimes, when I remained in school after the activities, we went to the municipality. And then the situation got worse, people were mistreated in the municipality even when they wanted to be issued birth certificates or whatever document. Especially the people who came from villages, because they didn’t know cyrillic, or they would ask for two-three times as much money and they did not have it and so on.

And my friends and I, having grown up in an urban area, we knew cyrillic. And we hid behind a pillar inside the municipality, I still remember it when I go inside, we hid so that they wouldn’t see us, and filled out their documents. And sometimes when I stayed late, my mother screamed at me, “How come you haven’t come home, you haven’t eaten? What about homework?” I mean, she was worried because I wasn’t doing my homework or help her at home because we were many children and as a girl I was supposed to help. And as soon as I told her what I did, my father supported me, and then I know that he hugged my mother and say, “Let her be because she...nobody stays in the municipality just for fun.”

You know? Somehow he made me believe that even though I was late, and maybe I even forgot to do my homework that day, you know, I replaced that with another good action. I mean, this happened not only once, but many, many times. There were times that we only had a little free time and came to the Southern part, near the municipality, where it used to be and where it is now. And that way we were eyewitnesses of bad events, how they dragged them and swore to them...

Part Two

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did life change during the ‘90s?

Valdete Idrizi: Now...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was middle school, will you tell us something?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes. We, as a family, we experienced every wave and storm that happened to us, I mean, Albanians, the discrimination. We experienced it directly in our family. As I mentioned it earlier,

first the war in Croatia, my brother was there and for a long time we didn't know what would happen until he managed to escape at last. Actually, he came right here with a kind of lottery that allowed them to take a break and come here. But, when he told us, that kid was transformed into someone else, Driton, who is two years older than I, he was young.

Then he used fake papers, the documents of the husband of our maternal aunt's daughter, I mean, the documents of a relative of ours and took the risk to go to Germany. Then we got firsthand information about what was happening there. Then the poisonings in the schools began. Eh, Linda, my sister was one of the most difficult cases in Mitrovica.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was she poisoned?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes. And it happened many times that she just fainted at home. For example, she was taking a shower, the bathroom door was closed and we just saw the water flowing, the water flowing and we had to break the door. And we saw her fainted.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Unconscious?

Valdete Idrizi: Totally unconscious!

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What happened to her? She went to school...

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, she went to school, just like everyone else. And it looks like it depended... some of them were more immune and I mean they didn't...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Absorb?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, it didn't have much of an impact on them. Maybe just a little dazing. Because there were three girls who got poisoned from my class as well, they were poisoned in the classroom, but not the others. Then my sister, it depended on the shifts, one of us was in the first shift and the other in the second, she was in the first year and I was in the third, I guess, in the second or the fourth, I don't exactly remember, but we were in middle school, in the gymnasium, in the same building. And they just brought her, we heard about it in the news, they came carrying her on their arms, the teachers and two-three students, we heard that Linda was poisoned, then there was the news.

We didn't even know how to behave with her. She had cramps, I don't know. And I know that our grandmother told us to keep a needle because she would bite her tongue. This is how it was manifested when she had a seizure. And you didn't know when she would have another attack. And once, we lived on the third floor, she was looking outside the window {shows how she was standing by the window} she was stuck like that. There, I mean, I don't know, fortunately someone in the family grabbed her because she could have died.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How long did this last?

Valdete Idrizi: Pretty long. Linda fully recovered only when she went to Germany. She went to Germany with her fiancé and she got married quickly just to fix the papers to go there together. And,

because until then we didn't know... even when she became a bride, the party was very modest, only people from the family...

[The conversation is interrupted]

Erëmirë Krasniqi: For example, in Germany, was she fully recovered?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, she was fully recovered when she went to Germany, because we saw that it was necessary for her to go somewhere else. I know that she went to a church in the village of Binqë many times. They had given her some injections, some foreign doctors, but...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What about the diagnosis, did they give her anything for the poisoning?

Valdete Idrizi: I really don't know, it somehow remained an enigma. At least I don't know, maybe... I know that there are some interpretations by professionals, but I don't really know. A kind of gas that is used, I don't know... can you believe that when we saw them in Syria lately, I simply got reminded of those cases... but I don't know what kind of gas that was. But there was the fear that those who were poisoned would have no chance to get pregnant. My sister was... this had a big impact on her. She is the mother of three children now. But she was fortunate enough to go to Germany. And in Germany, they looked for her on the lists that Doctors Without Borders had, or I don't know, the international community, they found her on the list and they treated her without any charge. I know that she was treated for around one year. Even though...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: There was a strong propaganda that it was not poisoning, that they weren't poisoned at all. Did you find any understanding of the crisis at that time, even just the mention that she was poisoned? You know, was it problematic to say that you are poisoned, while they publicly said that it was collective hysteria?

Valdete Idrizi: The building where we lived had five floors. We lived on the third. And there were more Serbian families, but there were more Albanian inhabitants, because our families are big. Each time they brought her from school, it happened three times that they brought her home from school...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Because of the seizures?

Valdete Idrizi: Unconscious because of the seizures, and all the neighbors saw her. And no comments. At all! In the beginning maybe, "A, šta je bilo?" "What happened?" And my mother never wanted to speak in Serbian, she would say, "How what happened? They poisoned her. Belgrade poisoned her." And they wouldn't comment at all. Because they knew us, because we had always lived there. This was something, I definitely don't accept it. But you couldn't avoid the truth. Because maybe it is another symptom, because when friends or somebody else came to our house to visit, when they met each other, it happened two-three times, once it happened that they had seizures at the same time and we didn't know what to do. We called the ambulance and...

A very difficult period of time. So, as I told you earlier, as a family we directly experienced everything. And then nothing came as a surprise. They expelled us from schools. I went to take my middle school diploma in a tea shop, because I couldn't go to the gymnasium because they expelled everyone from school. I had the luck not to go to home schooling, I mean, the faculty yes, but then middle school, I

mean the last time I went to middle school, inside the building, was before finishing the fourth year. But as I told you, I took my diploma in a coffee shop near my school.

And we started to feel it very much. Plus, I was very engaged in various activities even in the gymnasium. Later we organized various lectures with various professors. I know that we had professor Esat Stavileci once. He raised everyone's morale. A kind of trust, as kind of.... And so, when you are hit or when you experience all that from that regime, you have no other option but give up or engage...And I had the motivation which I told you earlier about, and the understanding from my family.

And then, we also had another even more difficult experience because our father died at a very young age. A lot, a lot. Our father died in '95, our brother in '93. And in '94 our maternal uncle who was staying at our place, he was 29 years old. So, we had series of tragedies at home. And, but the loss of our father was the peak of everything. And so, I don't know, maybe being active and available to others, I empowered myself without knowing. Without knowing that I was doing so.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: To face it more easily?

Valdete Idrizi: Also face all the challenges that were waiting for us in '99. In '98, my brother who was doing his military service left at a very early age. Then two of my other brothers were selling cigarettes and peanuts, and the police would come...there were many times when the police came at seven in the morning and beat them up and took the money. "Why are you selling them illegally?" My mother baked the peanuts in order for us to go to school. So, it was a very very difficult period. Simply surviving. And then, when you first experience that very closely, you are prepared for everything, for the worst. You are prepared to survive and do the best you can to simply overcome it more easily.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you enroll in the University in Prishtina or what?

Valdete Idrizi: No, no.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did you do in the '90s?

Valdete Idrizi: I went to the Faculty of Metallurgy in Mitrovica. It wasn't my choice because I always wanted to study acting or sociology, psychology, because in the meantime...I was very active in the theater... and...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Valdete, tell us a little about this part if you can?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, in the beginning [I was active] in the Aleksandër Moisiu theater, in the city. And now, I read a lot of psychology in order to bring the best out of the character, why is this character like this, why like that, in order to bring the best out of the character. And then I read various books at that time. And I was a pretty good actor (laughs). Because I would win public awards...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Super.

Valdete Idrizi:...and I think that the public is... or maybe my characters were such that exposed me a little more. But, I wanted to study acting, but the financial conditions weren't.... You had no chance to

go to Pristina and pay for the trip, the bus. We couldn't go. Then on the other hand, I didn't want to stay home. And then I had the option of studying technology and metallurgy. Geology was something that attracted me since my father was a miner. I said, "Okay, I will study geology." I wasn't one of the best students, because when you are forced to do something, you know. But I was one of the most active students of the Faculty of Metallurgy, because we organized freshmen parties and senior parties and so on, the birthday of Hasan Prishtina and other activists....and I was one of the organizers.

So, I moderated, I was always there, even in the organization of various students protests. And at the same time I was also part of the experimental theater Show Meselation, I was one of the co-founders of the theater, because we played together with Blerim, Fehmi and the others. And this was a bit different, they would call us non-serious. But our mission was to simply put a smile on the faces of people who watched us at that time.

And, somehow this was our mission, and it helped me a lot in life, how to approach the difficult moments of life. The experience in the theater as well as the experience of [studying] geology, in the faculty with various colleagues, with various generations, they helped me in my job later, after the war, to approach my problems more easily. To be honest, even during the war, to approach life, to survive. It simply helped me very much.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You mentioned the organization of protests in '97. Can you tell us, I mean, how was it, what were the reasons? Did you have any collaboration with Pristina?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Or what for, what idea circulated when you rose in protest?

Valdete Idrizi: It was just for Kosovo to be liberated because we knew that there was nothing in the institutions anymore. And before the protest, before leading the protest, I mean we as students experienced cases when the police would break in and beat all our male colleagues. They beat the professors as well, one of our professors, professor Skender Hoti, the English Language and Literature professor, they broke two of his teeth in front of us. And they would set us, the girls, free. One who was in the North said to me, "Your father is in the hospital and you are here." As if.... "What literature?" They said, "Are you learning Albanian literature?" They used different pretexts just not to allow us, you know, to be students, because we were considered dangerous.

So, I always carried, I carried mimeographed texts because we couldn't find original books of geology in Albanian, we only could find them in Croatian...but I have many mimeographed texts which we photocopied because they cost less...and we carried them in our bags. Eh, I always wore my truck suits and sneakers because I also went to the theater. And they also said that I was an actress, and if they said that I was a student, I would feel a little bit more...Because, I mean, the situation got worse.

Then we had our meetings in school, in order to do something. And when Albin Kurti and others began in Pristina, then each faculty got organized, I mean the organizing councils. And we, I mean we supported them, each city. In the evening, we went out with white shirts. Then the women's protests with the white papers, I mean, those were organized. There was no protest initiated by someone that we weren't part of, I mean somehow...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Involved.

Valdete Idrizi: ...involved. Especially those of us in Northern Mitrovica, it was more difficult for us to go out with the white papers, because everybody saw us. You were exposed. They knew... but they simply, they simply didn't stop us. So, many times we also had to lead the students protests and also camouflage the classes. Imagine, we had to climb the two-meter-long fences in order to jump to the other side and escape in the fields...because we went go, when we held lectures, we went together with those students in the first grade, because the students of the Faculty of Metallurgy, we went to the Skënderbeu school. Imagine, we went together with first grade students.

That school was, the Vrajanica school was at the entrance of Mitrovica, a school on the way from Pristina, but it wasn't in the city. I always walked two kilometers in order to go there. And then when the police came, we had...what if we happened to be on the second floor? We suffered a lot finding a way to pass. Then they opened some, at that point we knew how to escape, for those who couldn't climb two meters. So there were many experiences. The pressure and attacks that came from the army became more frequent. They didn't, they weren't...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How were the relations with your neighbors, I mean, of other nationalities? Were they passive towards these things? Did they contribute with any comment?

Valdete Idrizi: They directly, our neighbors didn't contribute directly, but they had a silent, unwritten agreement, that, "We don't want to talk about what is happening, we don't know." And you, I mean, even though you know, even though I told them that I was going to the theater. "Where are you going, neighbor?" I would say, "I am going to the theater." Nobody goes to the theater so early in the morning. They knew I was going to classes, but some things weren't allowed to be said. So it was like we knew about the situation, but we never spoke about it. We never spoke about the situation, absolutely, at all.

It was like total disconnect. But later we had some police who came to live in our building. And we were more afraid of them. That was one of those...that I told you about, that many times in the morning they would come to our apartment to take [the cigarettes] from my brothers. And later, "Why did you beat him?" Or, "Why did you do that?" So, there was a lot of noise. It often happened that they came to us early in the morning. And there was nothing you could do, but get angry and pray, or defend them physically because they were young, younger than I.

And they would take that, the money they had made all day. They would throw peanuts, it happened many times, they threw them on the floor of our apartment. And so... it gradually got worse and worse.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were they local or did they bring them from Serbia? And what... ?

Valdete Idrizi: They were mixed, there were even locals. For example, one of those policemen was, he didn't always live in our building, but he came there with a woman, they often came there. His name was Ratko. He was very notorious, everybody was afraid of him, and he lived on the floor above us. But this was a kind of situation. On the other side I was very lucky, because besides this very difficult life of being Albanian, I had the other rich life that didn't allow me to face the fear or the uncertainty.

But with the additional activities, I mean, because we performed shows all around Kosovo, and this somehow kept us up and raised our morale, it gave you energy, positivity. I mean, to love life no matter what was happening, a balance was created. And I am really lucky because of that and...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What kind of shows did you perform? I mean, were they comedies, with political undertones, or how were they?

Valdete Idrizi: There were many of them. For example, the shows with Show Meselation were tragi-comic, black humor. For example, we had the section, *Ça po flitet?* [What is being said?]. We always talked about what was being said in Kosovo, and the negative things but in a comic way. Or the generations, we would treat the issue of migration back then when people were leaving, asking them not to leave but stay and do something for this country. And everything that happened, we played current events on the stage. But always with comic characters, who were really loved by the audience.

And with the other theater, because we played in two theaters at the same time, with the Aleksandër Moisiu theater for example, we had comedy as well as a tragi-comedy, *N'shkofsha mos u kthefsha* [Once I go, may I never come back]. And we also performed a show in the madrassa in Pristina, we performed a show in order to reach more people and ask them not to leave Kosovo. Because back then we met a lot of people. Some of the shows were really of a patriotic character, *Kërsimë është emri im* [My Name is Smash]. We had to hide the props and guns, also the traditional national costumes clothes that we used.

I mean, a kind of camouflage was needed, we had to prepare a plan B if the police stopped us. We went to Istog, Peja or Pristina, there were checkpoints. "Where are you going? Why are you going?" We had to tell them, I will never forget Mickey Mouse, we told them, "We have a show with Mickey Mouse." We didn't dare tell everything. But it was a diversion, I mean the activity was a show but it aimed, in that mess, it aimed to at least bring smiles to people...

A kind of relaxation for that one hour, I don't know, maybe a positive energy. Because it was really difficult. And it is good... to be honest, when we began to perform shows in some coffee shops, we also begin to benefit a little. Then, by having money you could also help somebody else in other ways. So, for example I began to pay for my semester with that money. Because there were times that I lost one year because I had no money to pay for the University. But being the best was never an issue for me. I never was the best. So, it was important to move forward. And I don't know, this is how I remained active for my whole life, until the situation got really worse.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was the war for you, Valdete? In Mitrovica?

Valdete Idrizi: Uh, this is another very difficult period. In '98, our brother had already joined the *Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës* [Kosovo Liberation Army]. And I didn't support him at all in the beginning. I didn't support him because he was very young, I mean, he hadn't turned 18 yet and I said, "He won't be able to take care of himself."

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Who recruited your brother?

Valdete Idrizi: He went on his own because he said, “Do I always have to allow Ratko to come here and beat me?” Because my other brother left in ‘97. And he never wanted to go but we saw that the situation was getting worse and his age was very delicate. They would disappear you at that time, you know? And somehow, he barely made it. Other brothers sent him money. He went illegally, through Hungary or I don’t know. And then, only Burim, my mother and I remained at home. Burim is six years younger than I. And when he said that, he went. And when he went, he still mentions it to me, when I said, “If they kill you, [no], if you die, I will kill you” (laugh). Because I was afraid he wouldn’t know how to take care of himself because he was very young.

And so, he went too. Burim went. And, later, later, I justified him because how can one stay at home when someone comes just so, and mistreats you in front of your mother and sister every morning? We experienced that even earlier. And that time was very challenging because we were simply afraid of the police, because not many people were left in the city. It was easier to be safe in the villages, let’s say. And he was shot three times during the war. And I treated him myself during the war. So, I practiced on him.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you communicate with him? In the meantime, what kind of communication did you have as long as he was in the UÇK?

Valdete Idrizi: Of course there were no telephones, we couldn’t, we didn’t have one. We only had a fix telephone, a telephone at home. And there was a bus that went from the market of Mitrovica to Bare, the village of Bare in Shala.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In which area did he fight?

Valdete Idrizi: In the area of Shala. The brigade *141 Mehë Uka* in Shala e Bajgorës. I went there by that bus three times a week. But each time I got in the bus, I feared, you know, what would I say in case the police stopped me, “Where are you going?” “To the village?” So, I went, each time I went, there was a kind of fear, of course, but on the other hand when I went there and saw young men as well as even older, I felt refilled with energy, however a positive energy. Or better said, hope. And so. There was no bus until three in the afternoon, so I spent some time there.

I didn’t have what to do, so I walked all around those villages. The village of Zabërgj. I walked through all the villages in the area of Shala. And that is why I love nature very much. And since then (laughs), I don’t prefer to go to restaurants in the weekend, I prefer nature more.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How long did he stay there? I mean, in ‘98 he went to Shala e Bajgorës?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, yes. He...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you visit him often?

Valdete Idrizi: First he was shot in Albania, they had gone there for arms. Here {points to the eye} he was shot with a bullet, and got an infection. Secondly, he was hurt by a certain kind of gas, he couldn’t see for several days, we didn’t know about that. And thirdly, he was shot in the *teha të Mazhiqit* [The Blades of Mazhiq] where he was shot in this part of his arm {shows the junctions of the hand} and had pieces of a grenade in the right side {points to her back }.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was there a lot of fighting in that area?

Valdete Idrizi: That is known as *Beteja e Mazhiqit* [The Battle of Mazhiq], I mean it is pretty known because that is where Avni, who has a monument in Mitrovica, died. Maybe you know him, Avni Shabani. The others, some of them were shot. I practiced on Burim. You know, there is nothing more terrifying. But, Bajram Rexhepi was the doctor, and he said, “There is no time to cry here, you have to learn.” He said, “Because this is a war, you never know.”

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you go there to help all of them, or just because you heard about Burim?

Valdete Idrizi: No, I would go, because as I told you, there was a bus at nine and it would take thirty minutes to take you there, then there was no bus until three in the afternoon. So, I would go and clean, wash and do everything. Then I would go out. Or would take their children, I mean, everything. Because there was nothing you could do in the village. You weren’t allowed to go inside where the soldiers were...but I don’t know, I did whatever was needed to do. You know, I would stay there until three. Of course, I wouldn’t sleep nor stay at one place, but met people from the village. So the time flew so quickly and the time to return came.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What about when the bombing began, what happened in the city? Did they expel you?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, they expelled us. Especially the first night, the first night when the bombing began, of course we were in our apartment. And my sister came from the North. She lived in the North as well but in the *Kodra e Minatorëve* [The Miners Hill], another neighborhood, she brought her little children, three little children. The same with my paternal aunt, [he lived] in the same neighborhood, and they came to us...and there, that night, a couple was murdered, I mean husband and wife, in front of our building, on the second floor.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Albanians?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, Albanians.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What reasons for, or just because, I mean...?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, their son was working with the OSCE [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe] and they were, one of the most respected families in the city, the Beqiri. And they were killed. Then they were killed, there was a shop where we would buy everything in Suhodoll, two young men, two brothers were killed. One of them a young father of two little children, the other one a young boy, I don’t know, twenty something. That night Latif Berisha was also killed, as well as Agim Hajrizi and we were just waiting when they knocked on our door. And then they came to our apartment with masks, and they simply chased us through the stairs.

That must have been someone from our neighbors, because they didn’t beat us. There, I mean, we took whatever we could. And we couldn’t...we didn’t know where we were going, nor what we were doing, at all. Then at the city clock, where the beginning of the bridge from the Northern side is now, that is where the city clock was, a patrol stopped us there, “Where are you going?” And took the men

from us. My sister's son, Meriton, was five years old, or even less, and she was carrying him. And they wanted to give him back, and they said, "No, no, the boy here." And I know that there I started to think that they would kill all of them. But somebody came and said, "Set them free." That was a terrible episode.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was it day or night?

Valdete Idrizi: Day, day.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In the middle of the day?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, in the middle of the day.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Right? Were they your neighbors?

Valdete Idrizi: No, I didn't know them, because we just passed. Somebody else happened to be there. Then we went to *Tavnik* neighborhood, to my maternal uncle's, that's where we stayed. I know that when we counted, there were 49 people staying at that house. We slept seven-eight of us in the same bed. Because they came from the village of Çabër, I mean, other maternal uncles. Because troubles had just started there, the time came when they also burned the whole village, so they stayed there. Until they came to chase us in the queue. In the notorious queue. We went to Gjakova.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: On foot?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, on foot. With those bags and everything we had, because they were sending us to Albania. We thought that we were going to Albania. Even though it was very terrible. The idea itself that you are leaving your country. But you weren't allowed to stop there. All the way we saw people with bags who had been killed, swollen. Precisely in Shipol, I mean still in Mitrovica. Now, to Skenderaj. I know that...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were you escorted by the police?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, yes. That is why you didn't dare go anywhere. I know that in the village of Klinë e Begut, a man went to the river to get some water, and the sniper killed him. His wife wanted to run, somebody from the queue stopped her and it continued. You didn't dare move at all. And that was one of the most terrible moments that I wouldn't wish on anyone in the world. We walked during the day, during the night. Once we stopped to rest, the patrol and the cars of the paramilitary soldiers came and said, "Stand up and walk!" I know that when they turned us back and when we arrived near the river in Gjakova, I mean before entering Gjakova, an order to turn us back came.

And we returned to a village, Gremnik. We stayed there for a couple of days, I don't know, five or six nights, I don't remember. But we stayed there, everybody, wherever they could. We had the luck of staying in a burned house. A door was my bed and a stone was my pillow, because there was nothing else. And I mean, our feet were full of blisters because of walking too much. We stayed there for a couple of days and nights. And it was really, really terrible. But on the other side, a kind of balance, we just stayed there, as hostages, we didn't know what was happening.

We heard things such as, “They came and took this, they didn’t bring that back.” Some young mothers, I know that they took girls... everything was talked about in the village. And they didn’t bring them back. Some of them they did, you know? And now we listened to all of this inside, with my maternal uncle, my sister, my mother, we had 15 children under the age of 15. And I played with them. I made marbles out of dirt. We performed shows. I mean, we were hostages on one side, and we didn’t have what to eat. I know that I went to steal corn. You know, wild corn, but fortunately we didn’t get sick, you know?

This is really true, we didn’t have what to eat. We ate unclean things, because we didn’t even have dishes, everything was burned. I played with children, you know? And somehow, because I wanted to bring them together in order for them not to listen to those stories... and really, people fought over flour because we didn’t have anything.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How many people were there?

Valdete Idrizi: I don’t know, I don’t know.... One day somebody wrote something about this queue, and I wanted to know. But you know how, thousands of people. You couldn’t see the end. At all. Because a queue from each neighborhood was sent there, we were sent to Gjurakovc and other villages, I mean, Bresalc and Zllakuqan and the other side were sent to Peja. For example, my grandmother and my paternal uncles had ended up on the other side, in Peja. And we ended up there, in the other queue, I know that during the night in Zllakuqan, I will never forget how some families showed up and gave us bread. Loaves of black bread...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Albanians?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, they were Albanians. You know the villages, they just said, “Catholics are giving us bread.” You know, you would hear that. In the dark, in the queue. That night I lost my mother, because it was dark... I just saw, either I walked too slowly or she did, but we lost each other. I didn’t meet her until the next day. But I wanted to tell you about this part with bread. Naim was, he is our brother-in-law, and he was the brother of my best friend, and he remained with my family. And we wanted to have a loaf of bread, each one of us.

And I had a loaf of bread, he had a piece of cheese. And we said, “Shall we split them?” You know. And mine fell on the ground and you couldn’t bend down to take it because the queue was moving. *Ku-ku*, and then we joked about it, how sometimes it is just not your day (laughs). I am laughing now because back then it was a kind.... Or, or, when I called, “Mother,” then they all answered, “What?” You know? Because there were many mothers in the queue, I didn’t know which voice was my mother’s. I couldn’t call my mother Hajrije in the queue, you know? I thought that she would recognize my voice. She had remained with the other maternal uncle, I don’t know, talking, until the next day, and we separated in the dark.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you walk during the night as well?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, yes.

Erëmira Krasniqi: Nonstop?

Valdete Idrizi: I am telling you, nonstop. When we got to the entrance of Klina, there was a part, I never felt colder in my life. Never, ever, ever. Never colder. That is where I found my mother and I know that I would warm half of her body with my body. With my body and her body. The other part was ice cold. And that is where we slept, we rested for some time. Maybe a couple of hours. And they would just come *tiiiiit* {onomatopoeic} with cars and would force you to walk again. That day we walked until near Gjakova through Klina, the city, then in some fields, in the main street that is there.

I had never been on that road before. Then they just sent us to that village. Now, somebody was fortunate enough to stay in a normal house. There were dead animals in the village, you know, swollen? You know how the corpse becomes after some days. And it rained a lot. It rained all the time while we were walking. Terrible. Seriously, terrible.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was the plan to do with you in that village? Did you stop just to rest?

Valdete Idrizi: I guess they got the order not to allow us to go to Albania, I don't know. And we were walking. People from that village had gone to Albania earlier. Because we couldn't find any of the village inhabitants.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: They were empty?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, they had emptied them earlier. Some burned house, some of them just demolished, some of them very normal. And everybody went wherever they could. For example, in the room where we stayed there were three-four families. You know, we would sleep like that. I told you that we found a door somewhere else and I took it, so your body would have stripes prints. That seemed just as a really good bed, otherwise I would have to sleep on the floor.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were there policemen then, did they abandon you, they just left you there?

Valdete Idrizi: No, they were on the main road. You know the village, the main road {illustrates with hands}, now we weren't that far, we weren't that deep into the village. I mean, we didn't dare go deep into the village because we didn't know what...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Would happen to you?

Valdete Idrizi: We didn't know what would happen to us. And you always had to stay in the crowd. During the day we went out and walked to see who was around...I will never forget, a professor from the University, Ejup Qerimi was my professor, after the war we met and I told him...I don't know how bad I felt when I saw him wearing some *opinga*, because I guess his shoes were destroyed because of walking, when I saw him like that, maybe because he was my professor, I felt so bad and I said, "Oh professor," I said, "I feel ashamed of myself." I said, "When I read about Holocaust and said that they are exaggerating a little because it cannot be that bad. You know?" I said, "But thank God I haven't said that to anyone, I kept that thought within myself." I said, "But I feel ashamed of myself," I said, "Because there is nobody who can describe the suffering."

At that time we were without bread, you know? You know when they say that, I don't know. Terrible. Our feet were all bloody. When we went into the sun in Gremnik, we saw our blisters drying and our skin got thick. Everything. Yes, it is a very difficult period in life. And, I don't want to forget it. I want to

remember it, I don't want to forget it so that we know how to value what we have today. I mean, there are chances to get better. People who survived. Because many others lost their people.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you go to Albania?

Valdete Idrizi: No, no we didn't go to Albania because they turned us back. They turned us back in Gremnik. We went back some kilometers. We didn't know when would they come to Gremnik and what would they say. We returned to Mitrovica in the queue. All those kilometers. We returned to Mitrovica. When we returned to Mitrovica, what did we see? You saw burned houses, demolished houses, everything. My mother's vein burst and she couldn't walk, we stayed there, only my mother and I up in the village of Lushtë, coming down to Shipol.

We remained in a shop because she said that she couldn't walk anymore. She said, "Leave me, go." I said, "I can't!" Because she stood enough but she had problems with veins and they burst. And it was obvious because we tied a scarf around her leg earlier. And then, I know that I shouted and cried as much as I could, "You want to kill us both here." I know it is unfair, but I was afraid that they would kill both of us. And everybody left, only we remained. And we crossed a street there and entered a house. We had walked pretty much because only when we woke up in the morning I realized where we were. We entered the house, there was no electricity, nothing. And while touching things, she got hurt, she fell, and we found some bread.

We ate that bread, I split it into two pieces. When we saw it the next day, I guess because we were tired and hungry and when you are like that you cannot eat much, the next day, I didn't dare light anything, but even if I wanted, there was nothing, we saw the bread was all molded, you know, it had turned green. But we liked it so much, you know, at night, that we didn't even want to talk about it. And nothing happened to us. The next day, I found a wheelbarrow in the house. We were near the village of Zhabar. There was a downhill, and a man came, he had heard the noise from us, because when we were looking for a place to stay, we made noise.

And when we went there, he gave me a wheelbarrow. He said, "Put your mother in the wheelbarrow." And with it, we went downhill, we crossed the street and went to Tavnik, again to my maternal uncle's, but half of his place had been destroyed, there was no room for us. The next day, Burim found us, my brother had found the house of a family, the house of someone's paternal uncle who was in Albania. People from Mitrovica knew each other in the queue at the station. Many people were killed there. Some are still missing. And...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Could you visit Burim at that time?

Valdete Idrizi: No, but Burim was here, in Tavnik, they had come down to Tavnik at that time. And he was healed in his left arm, he continued being a soldier. And, I mean, we remained in Tavnik, in that village. And we didn't have anyone, you didn't know because you couldn't get any information about what was happening. You no longer had the luxury of going, in such situation. For example, Naim's family, who was with us, had remained in Bistricë, in the municipality of Leposaviç. He didn't even know what was happening with them, and they didn't know what was happening to him. We had a very difficult episode when returning.

In the village of Llaushë, in the entrance of Skenderaj, that is where they took the men away. Three of my maternal uncles, the husband of my sister and Naim. And as I told you, he is our brother-in-law. Five men were taken only from our family. And in the news, they said that they had been killed. After some time, after around one month we stayed, we waited in the second queue and so on, and we saw one of our older maternal uncles in a photograph with his family in a camp in Albania. They had been taken and sent to the prison of Smrekovica, mistreated and all, and then sent to Albania. And now, but we didn't know what was happening to them.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Where did you get the news from? Serbian news? CNN?

Valdete Idrizi: No. Deutsche Welle, if you remember it, we heard our sister's, Linda's voice who was in Germany, "I don't know anything about my family." Only one house in Tavnik, I mean, he was the paternal uncle of my friend who allowed us to talk, we gave her that number, also our brothers who called from Germany. Just to let them know that we were fine. And when we heard Linda cry there, it was very difficult. We listened to the news, to the news from Kosovo, we listened to every news that we could.

Then, after there, after the second queue, I mean that was terrible too. They kept us there for the whole day. They only came and said, "You, come with us." I know that Arian, the older son of my sister, they were feeling very bad because they didn't know whether they had killed their father or not, he was 15 years old, Arian, and we dressed him with a wool sweater and a scarf, so that he would look like a girl. Because we said...he didn't want, he screamed because he didn't know. And we saved him. I mean, because they also took 15 year olds. We didn't know where they were, or where they were sending them.

I know that they killed the brother of my friend there. And then, many things happened in the returning queue, or...We returned to that house in Tavnik. Until the police came because they knew that we were Burim's family, and Burim was dangerous, and they were looking for us. Burim said, "You have no other option but leave for Montenegro." I was so against it. I said, "I don't want to go," I said, "Because I want..." Because I would cook and do everything for them, help them. Then, a girl was shot, we would go to houses to collect patches. I became a kind of an expert, practicing on my brother.

You know, we helped people who were wounded somewhere, and somehow, we were more active during the whole day during the war. And that is why I didn't want to leave. Then, he said, "No," he said, "If you stay here," he said, "they, Ratko Savić, the policemen of that time," he said, "Come here, to this house." He said, "They are looking for... how do you want to leave Vjollca with the children?" My older sister. And we got into the bus. We didn't have any money, a ticket cost 150 Marks. Then... 150 Marks....

Erëmirë Krasniqi: To Montenegro?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Oh God!

Valdete Idrizi: I know that Burim asked someone for the money. And then we got into the bus. I know that I never stopped crying there. You know, never! Because it was more difficult than the queue. Because I left him and the country. And on the way we saw Çabër, there were no houses at all, at all, at all. Because we didn't know what had happened, and my maternal uncles lived in Çabër. No houses, at all. And then we went to Ulcinj where we stayed in a camp, even though my maternal aunt had a house, we didn't want to stay there because... a tent, they gave a tent to my mother and me, and another one to my sister with her children.

But then after we saw that our maternal uncle had gone to Albania, my sister found an opportunity and they helped her from abroad, she illegally went to Albania to find her husband, to look for her husband, and she found him. She went to Albania. My mother and I remained there in the camp. It was very difficult in the camp because you would just go and listen to the news, and it was a very difficult period. Then, when they said, that is where I got the news that it was liberated, "How come it is liberated?" Because it was unbelievable for your brain.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How long did you get to stay there?

Valdete Idrizi: A few weeks. I mean, I went, I left in the middle of May, or in the late May, I didn't even stay in Montenegro for a full month. Before the troops entered... I just was there long enough to experience the feeling of the refugees. Because it was terrible, the lack of information. I started feeling like those who lived abroad and wanted to go crazy because they didn't know what was happening. But you especially don't want to be abroad when you have been there all the time. Then they didn't allow us, because we wanted to return right away, but they didn't allow us because they were afraid that we would step on mines. You couldn't return from Montenegro voluntarily.

[The following parts have been conducted in Mitrovica on May 28, 2017]

Part Three

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Valdete, can you tell us about the day when you returned to Mitrovica and how you found out that you no longer could return to the North, because Serbs were there?

Valdete Idrizi: We, it was obvious that we couldn't wait to return, to return home, to our place, in the North. When we came, we had heard from people in the bus or I don't know how, we had heard that they are not allowing Albanians to go to the North. But somehow, when you don't like something, you know... you don't easily accept it. And we arrived. First we went to meet our maternal uncles and first to see our brother whom we hadn't seen in a while. And we had heard many words saying he is fine and some that he is not fine. And we wanted to come right away, I mean, to the bridge, and we saw the fences here. I mean, the bridge, they wouldn't allow us to cross. French soldiers, you know... what happened? I mean, what to do?

I don't know whether there were fences or only soldiers, I don't know. But I know that you couldn't physically cross. And we didn't have where to go, we had no house. And then, my brother found us a house to stay for two-three weeks, we stayed in an apartment, it belonged to an Albanian family that he knew, we stayed there for some time until the time would come for us to return. Even though, we didn't say until we find another [house], but until we return. And then we saw, somehow it got worse. We met people, our neighbors from the North, "No, they are not allowing us." We heard many words

that they had put mines in our apartment, even if somebody wanted to go illegally to the bridge, or just go at their own risk, they won't allow them.

We tried to go as a group. There were some protests that were organized in the North. Then they threw stones and scream. The French military turned us back, KFOR. And somehow, it was difficult to accept it, impossible to accept the fact that you simply cannot return, and there is nothing you can do about it. Imagine, I only had one dress and one t-shirt, and personal stuff, I had nothing else with me. Clothes we had for the queue were too warm, the weather was good at that point. We had nothing. And in the meantime, life was continuing. We had to continue living somehow, I kept looking for a job, I would go out everyday to look for a job.

On the other hand, a kind of fight to go to the North, I just wanted to go near the bridge and meet people, to simply find an idea of how to go, on the other hand I was looking for a job. When I found open calls, you know, I went there on foot because we had no car nor anything else at that time. That period was also difficult because when your turn for the interview came, they simply turned you back. On the other hand, when you returned home, you had nothing. Of course we had what to eat and drink thanks to the help of our brothers in Germany, I mean, but simply there was nothing, we had no place to live.

Two weeks in one house, then another one. You didn't know when you would return, because people came back and you were forced to leave. It was difficult, the part of moving, even though we had no clothes, or we didn't have many things, it was easy in that way, but emotionally it was very difficult knowing that you are unsafe. I mean, you simply didn't know your future, what would happen to you. At the same time, you couldn't enjoy liberation when you saw people on television or in the news celebrate, I mean, in their own houses, and your happiness was somehow partial.

On one hand, you were happy because you no longer had the fear that you would die, but, you know, on the other hand the fear of unsafety. Simply what was about to happen to us, you know, when, how? On the other side, I believed, because a kind of hope never gets lost. This house and I no longer believe... from this house we will go to our apartment, you know. We always had this feeling.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How long did that period last?

Valdete Idrizi: Huh, it lasted for a long time. Actually, even today...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Even today.

Valdete Idrizi: Even today, I mean it still lasts and you still don't have, I mean, you feel the absence, because you simply cannot go and are denied that right. But now, unfortunately, we are used to go from one house to another. We have changed eleven houses in these years... in the meantime, I got employed and I am trying to keep up hope and the morale... Simply, we needed to buy the essential things. I am talking about glasses, stove, things, I mean starting everything from scratch.

Once we settled in one house, we had to move to the other. Or they would return, the families that were living abroad, "My brother returned, my sister returned, I am sorry, but you have to leave." And each year the rent would get more expensive, I mean the other part as well. At the same time we tried with Habitat, for example, that had taken us under their administration, I mean, the management of

the properties in the North was under their mandate. And nothing, they didn't do anything. We found out who was living in our apartment.

And they told us to go to their apartment. But how could we go to their apartment when they were taken at the time of the regime, you know, the property was contested and you could get killed, "I am sorry but I want to enter." So, we were not a priority of our leadership, absolutely not, at all. In the meantime, I considered myself lucky because however, I was working and we lived a good life, I could say.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did you start working after the war? I mean, how did you manage?

Valdete Idrizi: After the war, I was disappointed nine, ten times. I was accepted for the interview and when the time for the interview came, they wouldn't call, or they would take someone else... after quite a disappointment, I met one friend who said, "Vali," after having played in the theater for a long time and having been active, "I have heard," she said, "There is a Danish program, a special program. They are looking for a theater instructor." "Really?" "Yes." And I ran to send the application and I got accepted. First, I worked as a theater instructor for children. And I enjoyed it a lot because I love children either way, and I was also engaged in something.

The salary was not really, really good, but it was enough as a beginning. I mean, one of the best experiences for me was that I worked, at the same time it was painful because I worked with children who had lost their parents during the war, or one of the parents, with traumatized children who found it difficult to speak, to express themselves. Later I started working with children who sold cigarettes or other things, chewing gums, on the street, I mean, street children.

We started doing theater plays with them. On the other hand, working with children helped me improve my morale, mood and energy and positivity. And then, the same organization promoted me. I became the manager of the Center, where we had around 18 employees.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did you do at the Cultural Center, I mean the Community Center...

Valdete Idrizi: A community center, community center, psycho-social program, where there were women's activities, first with crafts and then with sawing machines, children programs, be it theater, music, sports activities. And I mean, we had some grants which we gave later, or did some of the projects. We taught them how to write projects and develop them. Even though I was a leader of the center, I continued being active with *Meselation* after work.

I mean, I continued working as a volunteer in the theater. We conducted four theater plays with the children and at the same time I attended other activities. I have always been used not to doing a single job, I always did other activities besides my job. Even though I was still unemployed, I started the first initiatives for a dialogue with the North. I felt the need to listen to my peers from the North, what did they have to say about what happened. Secondly, I wanted to return and I wanted to be present through activities and simply ask for my right to return.

And being part of these initiatives, I mean they were organized by the OSCE or some Norwegian organization, I mean, I hadn't initiated them but I wanted to attend them. And I met people, somehow I got to listen to them. There was war for them too, even though expected in some way, but still

unexpected. It is not that they were happy about what had happened. And so, we began to listen to the other part. In the meantime, one day I was at work with the Danish, I listened to two people speaking on the radio, the back then Radio Mitrovica, it began to work, I listened to two foreign guests. There were many foreigners at that time who came to build houses, streets, everything.

But what I liked about it, what I heard, I was just closing the office which was located in Tavnik, in Mitrovica. They said, "We are representatives of a Dutch organization that deals with peace building. We have experience in Croatia, Bosnia. And we are here to listen to people, whether they have any idea on which we could help them with our expertise. We will go to every city in Kosovo and see." That impressed me, and made me lock the office quickly and run to find them in the studio, it was that urge to listen to them.

And I said, when they all were coming to teach us, "Do this, do that," for me it was the first time that somebody said, "I want to listen to you, what to do." Even though at the same time I didn't even know what I would tell them, I ran and went there, met them on the stairs, two Dutch people, Miriam Strajk and Dion di Vonderberg, now I know them, they are my friends. And I could hardly breath because I had ran a long distance, I had no car nor telephone, I had nothing. And I ran and said, "Are you the two Dutch people who spoke?" They said, "Yes." I said, I said, "I liked what you said," I said, "You said that you are here to listen to someone." I said, "I am here to tell you to listen to me." They just stopped, "Ou." I said, "Yes." They said, "What?"

"Yes, all the," I said, "Internationals are coming here to tell us what to do and they are building houses and so on, and so on, and so on, but nobody wants to work with people." I said, "I am telling you that it is good to work with people. I am from the North. I cannot return to my home. I know that in order to return, I have to precisely talk to those in the North." *Tap, tap, tap* [onomatopoeic]. They were rushing because there were no hotels in Mitrovica at that time, they wanted to go to Pristina and they said, "Where can we meet you?" I wrote it on a letter, because I was holding the theater courses with children in a building, "From this time to this time, I am here."

And somehow I believed that they would come. Even though a part of me was saying, "They will go to Pristina, everything will be done there, they won't return." But somehow, my other part was saying, "Yes, yes, they will return and listen to me." The next day, they came. They came while I was working with the children. I just told them, "Sit down," and continued working with children. As soon as we finished, we began the conversation and then they constantly came and together we developed the project which later became an organization, Community Building Mitrovica [CBM].

But in the meantime I also worked in the center, the DRC [Danish Refugee Council], and was developing the project, this is how it was called in the beginning, it wasn't an organization. At the same time I was charged with a lot of will and hope that this city would be, it would be united and I would return home. Because developing ideas, talking to people, because it isn't that we simply sat, but everyday I would leave my work there, finish my work and tell my colleagues, "I am sorry, I have to go because of something about the North." I would leave my work and go translate in the school of music, with the director, or...I mean, just in order to convince them that we would do something here.

And that is how we founded CBM. Things were going well there. I resigned from the DRC because maybe I wanted to start something from the beginning in the CBM, to work with youth, women and all the national communities. But, what I always wanted, because maybe it is difficult to convince

someone, it is difficult when you tell them that it is good to work together and share the same values, develop ideas together, but when you prove it yourself, when you are a model and they see you working together, the impact is different. And so together with our Albanian and Serb colleagues, first there were two offices, one in the South and the other in the North, we had a Dutch as our manager.

Then, I was among the first ones who asked, I said, “If we want to do something, we have to do it together, we cannot do it separately, it will have no effect.” And my request was immediately considered and... first we met in the Netherlands. And we met and I was very insisting on the idea that if we wanted to succeed, we had to be together in one office, Albanians and Serbs.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So, you met Serbs from your city for the first time in the Netherlands?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, unfortunately, you know, yes. And I mean, I knew one of them, Dejan, he was my age. He was a musician, a good rock musician, because you know the faces of your age cohort. The two others, Ivan, I didn't know Ivan. I knew my Albanian colleagues. One of them was my math teacher and the other was my friend. I mean, those from the South, Albanians, I knew them very well. But somehow we came together in the Netherlands. I was the first, I said, “The reason why I wanted to meet you is that we cannot unite the city nor...”

Because at that time we didn't even think about uniting the city, because it got all political, “To unite?” It seemed uhu [onomatopoeic]. But, from that meeting in the Netherlands, we developed some ideas on how to do it. And when we returned, it didn't take long and we came together in one office.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In the South or in the North?

Valdete Idrizi: In the South, because KFOR had installed fences around the bridge, and there was one hundred meters that was called the security area, I mean, one hundred meters around the bridge, from the building of the municipality to..it was pretty secured for Serbs, that is why it was called the security area. People who wanted to come here were checked for arms or anything else, and it was more accessible. To us Albanians, when we wanted to ask for a security area in the North, it was impossible, because once the bridge was closed, there was no space for security area.

There was the Dolce Vita cafe, that was, I mean, there were the watchguards, [no], the bridge watchers who monitored everyone, and they even attacked people, beat and threatened people, I mean, that went on for year. And so, we founded the CBM.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In which year?

Valdete Idrizi: In 2001, in the early 2001. Because we spent the whole 2000 trying to bring people, I mean, various groups from the Netherlands, various partners. For example, when I said, “Why in Mitrovica? What can be done there?” “Yes,” I said, “Mitrovica used to be a city of culture and development. We can do things there, because we have had a city pride and a strong identity.” And then they brought Musicians Without Borders from the Netherlands. Then when they came here, at the same time we managed to support the school of music with instruments, second hand instruments, but they collected them there.

Then I went there several times to talk to people and gather, get funds and instruments and bring them here to the school of music. And some of the municipalities, so that there would be good government and collaboration in every municipality. So, for one year I also worked in the DRC and here until we developed the whole program for CBM. First for two years, then it became an institution in itself, then an organization. And then I led it all on my own, even though I did so from the very beginning, but now it was official. So, it went, it took a lot of time until we officially began. But I am very happy because through CBM we managed to work with people, to...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What kind of activities did you support as a multi-ethnic group?

Valdete Idrizi: First with separated groups, in the South as well as in the North, and as I said, cultural youth activities, we would adapt some old houses as women centers, you know, because...During the war as well as before the war we saw that as women, we are always more accessible to touch taboo topics and the more difficult topics and we were more accepted. I often wanted to invest in women because they showed that they are more courageous, more skillful and more vocal, and we knew that they would be very good advocates in the entire community. First we started working separately with the youth, with a group of retired people, depending on the requests we received from people.

I know that it was a *boom* [onomatopoeic] when we organized a big concert at the stadium of Mitrovica, and we did it at the same time in the center there, because they have no stadium in the North, we organized a concert outside. And although it had been only several months that we started working as CBM, we simply did that in order to promote our organization. And it turned out to be a very good step because people got to know each other and CBM was known by the people, and they knew that we worked in a mixed environment. Because we also told them here that they are organizing an activity in the North as well, and everything, we would let them know and we were hoping that the next step would be these groups coming together. Which actually happened after.

Then together with the community and the people, we began to develop our ideas, not only those who came with their ideas which we had to support, but we began to develop ideas together. Then the initiatives we had together, listening, talking, being listened to and discussing things we didn't agree on, because there were many things we didn't agree on as Serbs and Albanians. I mean, on the other hand, we discussed them...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you have conflicts, I mean, was there any situation when it was really difficult to agree?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, yes, yes. We constantly had such situations. For example, when we wanted to talk about history, we had learned history differently and we knew that, we especially knew the personal history which we had experienced, as for Serbs, for example, it was totally different, a totally different history, a totally different experience. And in the beginning they didn't even want to admit it, we didn't want to admit it either that they had experienced it that way. We really needed a lot of time until we gained each other's trust and until we got used to respecting the feelings of each other, whether being afraid of Albanians or of Serbs, or the feeling of unsafety, what you accept and what you don't, how you are identified.

With time, we began to respect, however, you know, human beings have the right to be afraid or to declare this or that, because there are consequences. So, basically we got used to caring for each

other as colleagues and talk about various topics. For example, even during the war, when, when I, for example, told my colleague, “How can you, how can you not know that,” I said, “I, as a student, could never enter the faculty?”

I said, “How?” You know, I couldn’t imagine how someone my age from the North didn’t know that I was expelled, just because of being an Albanian, from the system, and that I was always afraid to carry books because the professors could be imprisoned. I mean, each time they entered the classroom they beat professors, colleagues, students and so on, “No, no, it is not, I mean, it is impossible.” And they would say, “I didn’t know.” To me it was really hard to understand, unbelievable, until some point I just believed it, because nobody cared, everybody had their own lives.

But from that perspective, you know, she felt bad too. She said, “I am so sorry and I believe you. And it was difficult for me to believe that you really experienced that.” She said, “But totally different things were served to us by the media. And we, as Serbs, thought that you, as Albanians wanted to do something else, that is why they were expelling you, because you deserved it.” We talked together about these personal experiences. For example, the fact that they didn’t allow us to return to the North to our property, this was always an open debate.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did they comment on this part, how did they make sense of this situation?

Valdete Idrizi: In various ways. On one hand they felt bad, I mean, because everybody should have the right to return, on the other hand we had, somebody had their relatives, someone from their relatives who couldn’t return, the same thing. At some point we would accept it as another reality, we didn’t ask to return anymore, we knew there was no chance. It became worse each time, the separation became bigger. On the other hand, you would say, “What can we, as individuals, do, or as activists, or as an organization?” Somehow...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were they afraid of their own community?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, absolutely. And they were stopped and interviewed by the bridge watchers, “What are you doing in the South? Who are you working with?” There were cases when they had to stay in the North, when I am telling you that I got used to respecting their fear but also their decision to stay there for some days, because however, life is sacred, I had tried it myself. I know how it is to be threatened, attacked, and be the targets of attempts to kill us. And so, it wasn’t easy at all.

On the same hand, there were people from the South for example....the war wounds were still opened, no matter how much we tried, I had people from my family who were killed during the war. And an association was established, *Kujtimi*, [Memory], the *Kujtimi* Foundation, where families who had lost their loved ones during the war would gather. Some were found, some weren’t, they were looking for them. And when they came to the office and listen to them speaking in Serbian it was, you know, another challenge, telling them that we had to work together if we wanted to move forward.

And for those whose wounds were open, it was difficult to accept. So, it was very difficult to work with both sides, the South and the North. But somehow we were honest. I often said, “Are they guilty? Do we have to blame all of them? If we want to seek justice, we have to work together.” And, “If I really want to go there, I cannot do it without talking to the other, because they have lost property in the South.” I brought up specific or individual cases, telling them with names and lastnames, because the

city is not big and families know each other, who is who, or what they did and what they didn't do during the war... because, I mean, right after the war, "Whose is this? Were they involved or not?"

So, people knew each other, I mean families and neighborhood, everything in the South as well as in the North. But we were loyal to our principles and the mission of the organization, which was a really honest mission to unite the city and the people. And now, the mission to unite the city hasn't been achieved, but at least it stands as a bridge between people. Because we all agreed that the city cannot remain like this, ethnically divided, but all the citizens should be integrated and live as in every other city.

Part Four

[The speaker continues to talk about the time when she went to the Northern part of the city of Mitrovica]

Valdete Idrizi:...this happened a little earlier, I mean in 2001, right after we founded CBM. And we tried, they told me, "No, because of safety issues, we cannot send you there and you can't go to your apartment." And, however I said, "I want to take the risk, no matter what happens," and I didn't think about it because had I thought longer, I would have probably not gone.

And we left together with my sister, we took a black bag, a pretty big one because we thought of taking as many things as we could, because we didn't manage to take anything when they chased us out. And we went in front of our building. It didn't even take us five minutes from the bridge because we walked so quickly to go to our apartment. And it is not that far either way. When we arrived there, we wanted to enter... because somebody had told us that there were groups, that they had gone, they told us that it was empty. That motivated us to go and try if there was anything left.

And when we went in front of the building, the door was always open. I mean, five, a big building, five stories, we lived on the third. It was locked, I never experienced it before, it had never been locked before. And I went to the supermarket downstairs. There was a neighbor, her name was Zorica. I entered and in Serbian I said, "Do you have the key?" I said, "Because I want to go to my apartment." She opened her eyes wide open and said, "Even if I had it," she said, "I wouldn't dare give it to you." She said, "You better leave." I {mimics surprise}, you know? I wondered what was wrong with her. And, alright.

In the meantime, my sister went behind the building to call a neighbor who had worked for the DRC earlier. I had resigned from the DRC but however, just in case, I took the...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Badge?

Valdete Idrizi:...the badge, because they were a good tool. "With the foreigners" you were somehow safe, or immune, I don't know how to call it. I took it with me. It had expired because I wasn't working for the DRC anymore but I said, "Let's just take it with me just in case." And knowing that my neighbor works there, I called him, my sister went behind the building to call him, and in the meantime I stayed

in the front in order to be there in case someone would come out. And in the meantime, somebody had seen me, and I didn't see them, and I was, I mean, in front of the parked cars.

I don't know, you know, but somehow I have always been lucky, I don't know how I moved, but I just saw a big pot in front of my legs. Somebody had dropped it from the fifth floor and they were shouting, swearing in Serbian. When I looked up, I saw that they were talking to me. I just moved. I know that my shoes were all ruined because of the soil from the big pot. Imagine, if it fell on me, I would remain there. But somehow I was shocked, "What happened?" And then I shouted out of control, "What is wrong with you?" Then, until my sister came, I mean she didn't hear anything because she was behind the building calling our neighbor to open the door...

Six women came down very quickly, they were all dressed in black, and they attacked me. I didn't feel pain because of fear, you know... such a moment... but I know that when I returned, I was all covered in blood. For some time, it took me quite some time to recover, I mean from those scars that...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was the reason, why did they attack you?

Valdete Idrizi: They...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was the reason?

Valdete Idrizi: ...first they would say, "*Marš u Albaniju!*" which means, "Go to Albania!" "What do you want here? Are you here to threaten us?" Because they knew that my mother had tried to go there many times. When they went to, when they threatened her, she had told them, "I will throw a bomb on you." What kind of a bomb... And they took it as a threat. And once you go, they also knew that my brother was in the war, you know!

And they were dressed in black. They must have had their relatives missing or killed, or someone during the war.... And when...one of them was my former neighbor, and I know that they got me leaning on a car and they hit me as much as they could. There I saw two French soldiers, two young soldiers pass by and I shouted, "*Help*" [English], they just stared at me and turned around and left. Maybe that was more of a disappointment, for example, that there were people with weapons, because it was peace, you know? But somehow it seemed as if they were afraid for themselves.

I thought within myself, "It would make sense if I were a man, an armed man who would be a danger to them, but for God's sake, I am only a woman!" And you know, how could they not intervene, and this was something... somehow... I don't know, I experienced a great disappointment. Because, you know? Only later did I start feeling the pain, because I didn't feel any pain at that moment, at all, at all, at all. I only know that the badge saved my life. Because when my neighbor came, whom in the meantime my sister had called, when the neighbor came, the badge saved my life, I said, "I will fire Vuca," his son.

With this, you know. Who was I? I had resigned from that job. But I didn't know what to say in order to survive. And then she made the women go away. In the meantime, my sister came, she went crazy when she saw me, because she didn't know. But in my case, now, between two buildings there were two other Albanian neighbors who remained there until later. Then later, they put pressure on them and made them leave too. They had two, my friend had two missing brothers who had been killed

during the war. I mean, she had remained there with her mother and brother. And they heard me scream when I was attacked, and they called KFOR and the gendarmerie in order to come and take us out of our apartment.

Then we went upstairs to our apartment. We managed to take something, but I don't know what I took... nor what was there, nor what I had, because I mean, we were afraid. My sister leaned on the door, until somebody would come to save us, and maybe wait for the situation to calm down and leave. I was trying to take something, and I don't know...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was anything left? Was it still...

Valdete Idrizi: Everything was... there were some books, some photo albums. I took something, but I couldn't select things. We didn't have more than five-six minutes. Plus, the neighbor came. "Don't be afraid, because they cannot do anything to you. They will come now." Then KFOR came and took us out and we returned. But, I know that when a journalist wanted to interview me, I didn't agree at all. I couldn't imagine how a woman can be violent. Because, as I told you earlier, I have always believed in women, and I never thought that women and arms go together.

It was a kind of... on one hand I had the disappointment from the peacekeeping forces. I got reminded of Srebrenica and many, many other things. How brain functions in this kind of situations. And I know that I kept a scarf around my throat for one week so that others wouldn't notice. And I don't even know why I decided to keep that story shut, not to talk about it.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you feel like it was your responsibility not to disappoint the others as well, or what?

Valdete Idrizi: Maybe, maybe, because I actually didn't want to admit it, I didn't even know how to admit it. And I know that I told those at home that, "Don't worry, I survived. That is important." And I know that I said, "Thank God," I said, "This time," because really when I thought how it could fall on me and kill me right there. That was a situation for a time, I really didn't... people in the organization knew what happened, but I had chosen not to talk about it. And they knew and they respected my decision. And I didn't want to stay at home and lock myself, but to come and pretend that it wasn't nothing, even though it was very difficult to pretend, but at least this made it possible for me to continue, to simply continue working.

And somehow I am thankful for that energy, I don't know what pushed me towards such a decision, because maybe I would close it right there, my work, and the organization and I don't know what else I would do, or wouldn't do. But, I am thankful for the energy or to the motivation to take such a decision.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were there mixed families here before the war?

Valdete Idrizi: A few.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: A few?

Valdete Idrizi: I know that there were only a few. We could count them on our fingers. There weren't many. For example, there were Bosniaks and Serbians, that were, you know, married. Then some

remained on this side, the others on the other. But there weren't many of them. We knew all those families well. There weren't many mixed families. No marriages but... how to say, socialization was divided before, even in coffee shops, it all began earlier. I mean, not only at that time but also a decade earlier, or more, it was divided.

And then having that experience from three years before, 2004, I thought that I had to do something, to work with colleagues and return to plan B and C. I knew that a minivan drove from the bridge several times a day, it drove people who had things to do in the court. Be it Albanians, Roma, Bosniaks, it would drive all the communities that lived in the South to there and vice-versa. And, people used it. And I went to them, there were police from Pakistan or India, I don't remember. And I asked them, I wrote a letter, I said, "I am this, this and this." *"No, no, no, no."* [English] They would only allow you if you had a document from the court.

The daughter of my paternal uncle worked in the court. As every Albanian, doing something illegally, especially when you have no other way... I said, "Can you make a request as if I have something to do in court, that I want a meeting with the staff there?" "Alright." I did that letter, and I faked that letter for eight months in a row, changing its date. And I would only change it, I became an expert in faking letters, and I would put it in a plastic bag because I was afraid it would be ruined. You know, because I thought, "I will need this even later." But, each time I crossed, I was afraid they would catch me.

I would just do it like this {illustrates how she showed them the document}, and I would hide it, that, "I have a meeting today." And it was a very difficult period, because somebody knew that I had nothing to do there. It was difficult because each time I went, I was afraid they would capture me. Sometimes they would realize that you were going more often. I felt happy when the driver changed, because he would think that he didn't see me for one week or two. But when they saw you three times a week, it was difficult. And at the same time, the activity of faking documents was very difficult, you know, as a feeling. I mean, this speaks about the support we had from organizations, who could send me there without any problem if they wanted to.

Because they would go, I would always meet the same people there. Because the building where our office was located, there were the offices of some other organizations there as well, and they would see me. And they somehow knew how I had gone there. You know, they were the same ones who had refused me. Sometimes I had troubles returning because there was no room in the mini van, the last one was at 15:15, if I am not mistaken, when the court closed, I would remain there. I had to wait until late at night so that nobody would see me crossing, because you know, they could attack or beat me. And one of my colleagues would escort me to the neighborhood of the Bosniaks and the other bridge was calmer. And it was one of the most difficult periods.

Because on the other hand, we were doing good job, we were developing some ideas, then there was the energy that we could return once again, the trust that we could become an organization. And on the other hand, there was the constant fear that you were doing something that was illegal. The fear that something would happen to you again. And it was really, really difficult to return as a staff, as an organization once again. Then, after eight months we returned, or less, I don't remember, because it was April, and in the end of October we came together as an organization again.

They started liberalizing a little, the fences got smaller, and this simply was made possible. But I know that if I wasn't there, if I didn't fake [the letter] or [didn't make] the terrible journey, I know that it would be impossible and very difficult to make my colleagues come here. And then taking care of the

partnership which we had created with people from the North from all communities, because there they lived in mixed neighborhoods. Even Albanians who had remained there all the time during the war and after the war, there were some who had returned gradually, I mean, individually, to their houses, and I mean, with other communities.

I mean we had already... this is the responsibility of the trust they had on us as an organization. I mean, the responsibility was the greatest motivation for us, I mean for me as the leader of an organization to give them hope even when I didn't have much hope myself.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Serbs from the North, did they deal with the other national communities as well... ?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes.

Erëmirë Krasniqi:...Or only with Serbs?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, yes, no, we were together as a team...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You mean the project...

Valdete Idrizi:...we went together as a team everywhere. Even when we went to enclaves or to the neighborhood *Kodra e Minatorëve* [Miners Hill] that are mixed, we went together, Albanians and Serbs. And we really spoke one language... we had one mission. It wasn't... Sometimes for example, they assessed that only Serbs had to go, I trusted them, we sent only them until the situation calmed down. Or like this, at the same time we had developed our youth programs which somehow motivated us to work. The School of Rock had just started. Not officially yet, it wasn't founded as a school, but the project itself existed. On the other hand we were looking for talents.

We watched the students sometimes, we went to each other's [side] because we were afraid for their safety as well. But it was very encouraging, I mean, their collaboration. Then they also served to change the opinions of their parents for example, usually it is the contrary. To us in Mitrovica, it often happened that children or students were an example to their teachers or parents, yes.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Where was the Rock School, was it in the North or South?

Valdete Idrizi: In both sides. We couldn't do it only in the South because they were children. It was, I mean, it was a mutual decision that we don't dare send any child because they are only children. We didn't want to put their lives in danger. But with the internet and the era of technology, they started to create groups together and a kind of website where they wrote about their experiences. Others read them. And then in the summer school which we organized, they made common bands, common songs and sang them together. So, that was a really great motivation for us.

For example, in the beginning, parents wouldn't give us permission. They asked us, when we wanted to get their permission, because when we wanted to go abroad, for example in Macedonia, they would write and say... because we needed their consent, because otherwise they wouldn't allow us to cross the border... No. For example, "What kind of music will you be listening to on your way to Skopje? With whom will my daughter or my son sit?" I mean, we had to work not only for weeks, but for months, in order to convince them to give us permission. For example, the following year, according to these good experiences, parents would ask themselves, "Can you provide common transport?"

Because according to the friendship that the students had created, and those parents who had asked the difficult questions and didn't want to allow their children... especially Serbs, we had more questions from them than from Albanians, because, "Why are you going through Albanian [lands] in order to go there?" And then it was encouraging to see them. I mean, there was no more... simply, a group of talented children who cultivated good music. At the same time we started a project with the newsletter, a magazine in which we wrote about the South and the North. For example, "What works here and what doesn't work there?" That initiated dialogue and collaboration. We received various responses, *feedback* [English] from people in the North and those in the South.

It was the page with the most clicks, we had a kind of quiz with old Mitrovica photographs, where was it taken and when? And then there were some modest prizes. A dinner in a restaurant, be it in the North or in the South. Sometimes there were Albanians voting to go to the North, or... really, it was one of the best projects and I loved it very much. We also received threats. When we wrote about the mosque, I mean, that was right behind the bridge, I mean, Mitrovica was identified by the bridge, the mill and the mosque, for example, they would say, "Do you want to bring it back?" And people, if we asked to bring it back, because it was one of the symbols that identified Mitrovica...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did they tear it down, or what happened?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, unfortunately... In fact, no signs of its existence can be found. It was there until '99. The mosque didn't bother anyone. Then it was totally destroyed. And they erased any trace of the mosque's existence, now that part is covered in concrete. And with the project of the European Union, I mean, it cannot be seen at all. And we received such threats when we wrote about Mitrovica at that time before '99. But at the same time, with people seeing that we were succeeding, somehow some bridges were opened between people, and this motivated us. At the same time, there were blockades from decisionmakers, you know, they simply didn't help. It was pretty difficult, but...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was this a project to create a kind of mutual imagination of the city?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, yes, absolutely. Simply... because it hurts a lot when the city you grew up in with pride, a city that promoted and embraced values and diversity, that was known all around because of this, now turned into a city of problems, a city of divisions and murders. Somehow, when I went to other cities, "Where are you from?" "From Mitrovica." They would either say, "Ufff." I mean, as if they felt pity for you. Or, "Huh, Mitrovica, the whole Kosovo is in trouble because of you." This kind of image of the city that was created somehow hurt. And not only that...

We somehow aimed to bring that image back. And we always collaborated. I mean, this also contributes to peacebuilding and reconciliation in the city as well as normalization. But we wanted to fix the image. There were people who said, "Do you want to bring Yugoslavia back? Yugo-nostalgics!" There were such voices, but we didn't care about them, because if we did, we wouldn't be able to do what we did.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you think that increasing your communication, in a way you were also returning?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, that is... I mean that has always been my mission, my personal mission as well as the mission of my colleagues. Because we thought that as many doors were opened, it was easier for us, yes. Believe it or not, there were times that I went to the North even when I had nothing to do there. I just wanted to go, I didn't want to get tired of waiting. I said, "Let's try, let's try!" I mean, and I said, "If I don't go, nobody will." Institutions didn't dare going. I mean, they wouldn't have the courage to initiate or take the initiative to go.

They didn't even have the courage to support us in most cases. And I would go. Sometimes, I would just take a walk there and return. I said, "Let them get used, let them see that I will go and I won't stop." Then there was also the cemetery, the graves of my father and my brother were there. It was painful because there was a period when I couldn't even go, because they would not let me, they would throw stones at me. Or, if I found someone among my international friends to send me there... Because once you went up there, it was known that that was the Albanian cemetery and I could only stay there for one minute or half a minute and run back quickly. Then they demolished them many times. The pieces, my Serbian colleague brought me the pieces inside my office. She was terrified how was that possible, you know, because of an Albanian name and... this is painful because...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did any organized form of visiting the Albanian cemetery exist at that time?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, for Eid, yes. The Islamic Community would organize a visit by bus from here for Eid. And there was an unwritten agreement, Serbs would not bother us for Eid because they knew it was a holiday. Yes, for example the bus would stop down there. If somebody's graves were up high, such as my father's and my brother's, when you reached them the time had come to return and you had no time. Those who had them closer, you know, had more time. But sometimes you only needed to go on your own and not under pressure, or not simply to bring flowers but to spend some time there or plant some flowers and clean it.

And it was very sad how sometimes we couldn't do at least that. And we had tried to do something in that direction. For years, we communicated with the core actors from the Municipality, two, three municipalities in the North, because we didn't know where to go....and UNMIK [United Nations Mission in Kosovo], this parallel office, then the Administrative Office. I mean, you had to have three permissions or consents in order to allow Albanians to go and clean or repair the graves that were demolished, and not let them be demolished. Or Serbs to come here, because some Serbian graves were demolished here as well.

And once we reached a kind of reconciliation, consensus, you know, there would be, or how it happened to us, an adviser of a mayor or the prime minister with a bombastic declaration, would do the opposite. They would take us back. For example when we saw, Serbs were asking, their condition was, "We, Serbs want to clean the graveyards, we don't want the Albanians to do it." Albanians asked for the same thing. And we just saw a decision from somewhere above in the South, Albanians had just began to clean the graveyards of Serbs, the total opposite of what they had asked for. Then...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: But the graveyards of Serbs were in the South?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes. And then, such problems we had as an organization. Only did they not trust us anymore, but my colleague said, "Sorry, I cannot even come to work." We received many messages telling us, "You have lied to us." Then we had to write a kind of press release to tell them that it wasn't

our activity, we thought this way, to respect all the communities, you know. But you know when it is a boom, it is very difficult to, you know...This is only one of the examples of the harms that immature and rushed decisions caused, were they intentional, I don't know, I never knew. But they made our work more difficult.

Then there were a lot of good projects that today are organizations, they still function. For example the School of Rock functions as an organization in itself. I mean, I am happy when I see them on television or somewhere, concerts or... I mean, to be honest I even saw them going into a tour around Europe. They were voted and awarded several prizes. I get very happy when I see them, you know, knowing such a difficult journey it was. Or the *Qendra e Grave* [Center of Women], or the *Asociacioni i Grave për të Drejta të Njeriut* [Association of Women for Human Rights].

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did they introduce themselves?

Valdete Idrizi: No, Kosovska Mitrovica of course, you know, from Serbia. Since there was the revolution in Serbia, they said that they were from Serbia but from Kosovska Mitrovica, then they started saying, "Mitrovica Rock School." However, you know how, they mentioned it. Some didn't. We saw that they moved forward. But, there are some, some of their impressions that they would write themselves, I mean, how it changed their lives, the fact that they went to the summer school in Skopje. Then they began to do it here in Kosovo.

For example, they went, they came to Hotel Palace here in Mitrovica, Serbs and Albanians, they came to the South for the first time and performed and they forgot where they were, I mean, because they got into music. Or now, they are performing in Hamam Jazz Bar.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Really?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, then they went to the Swiss Diamond Hotel, there was an activity, I saw them, I felt so good. And...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So you have worked to integrate Serbs as well...

Valdete Idrizi: Yes...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: ...in other parts of Kosovo...

Valdete Idrizi: Yes...

Erëmirë Krasniqi:...not only integrate them in Mitrovica?

Valdete Idrizi: Absolutely...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: On your own, I mean...

Valdete Idrizi: ...no, no. We knew that in order for someone from the North to free your apartment, we need to make it possible for them to return to their place, you know, how is it possible, because otherwise it couldn't be done. But when you look at them, some of them have studied abroad...For

example, I know that Elbenita Kajtazi, she is a talent, she worked a lot. But I am very proud, because as a student of the School of Rock she made her way to Operas, to Deutsche Opera in Berlin and all around the world.

Or there are some others, Blerta or Visar Kasa, and they are pretty good, you know. Or teachers who are really really good, they contributed to their development, I mean, Zana, Edon, Nesim, they contributed and keep contributing to their development. So, somehow I am very happy when I see them, and I always say that everybody thought that I was *yhyy* [onomatopoeic], meaning she was crazy], I mean, because they didn't believe in this idea, "How can you think about music when people are getting killed?" This is what they told me. Their view was very narrow, you know?

But I always believed. And I am very happy when I see them now, when I see them myself. I rarely see them personally, but when I hear or read about them, as much as I can manage to follow them, I feel really happy. Or *Asociacioni i Grave* [Women's Association], for example, back then we began with a small center, since it worked...they worked with crafts, then there was a class of children, the books... Yes, because there were Serbs and Albanians and they didn't know each other's language. Because Albanians were returning, some would simply stay. But when there were incidents, when Albanian and Serbian children fought each other, women in the center would solve everything.

Then they started to install some lights, as if it was not obvious who was attacking whom, or throwing stones in the yard. They did a lot of simple good things that would directly impact the improvement of life and the integration of Albanians who had returned, as well as the improvement of relations, I mean, inter-social relations there. A lot of work has been done, I mean, they had good effects. After it worked, we went to other mixed neighborhoods and that is where it was proven that women are capable of a lot more. They organized themselves. And then, now it is an organization in itself.

They are doing amazing work. Sometimes they invite me to their activities and I am very happy to see them. You know, and I know that it was worth it, to simply trust them, because they did it, not I. I might just have given them a push. I am very, very proud of them. All the difficult journey, the walk, the fall, the standing, I mean everything was worth it. Because if I thought that the CBM did not exist now, but also other organizations, because they key to our success was that we always worked together, if they didn't exist, it would be a lot worse. You know, these initiatives wouldn't exist either.

But somehow, somehow, no matter my personal experience and the experiences of others, no matter all the unfairness, somehow I am thankful for not having lost the trust in humanity. I mean, I managed to love people, to continue loving people, because it wasn't easy. You always have your fears and dilemmas, as everybody else. Especially when you live in a city where you always feel like...on hold, "I haven't returned yet, I will return, I will return." That becomes a part of your life and identity, whether you want it or not. And at the same time you are interrupted, you cannot go, the fight continues. But...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did independence give you any hope for Mitrovica, in 2008?

Valdete Idrizi: Talking about the Independence Day, for example...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you experience it here?

Valdete Idrizi: You know, the day, for example, because one can feel every possible feeling on Independence day. Starting from happiness, first of all. Kosovo became a state. Starting from fear,

because it became a state without the North, and we lost that part. Starting from fear of what would happen, because we knew that the North wouldn't accept our independence that easily, and there are still Albanians there and they will suffer from it, and one day they will also be expelled. Starting from that, somehow I felt guilty to be totally happy. You know, such a bad feeling that you couldn't be totally happy for the independence.

At the same time, it was everybody's dream to see Kosovo's independence being declared, on the other side it wasn't full, you couldn't be happy. For example, I drove around with my car all day, together with my friend and colleague, through the crowd, seeing flags and shouting. And, we were happy but afraid at the same time... and constantly on the phone with those in the North. I mean, not only with Serbian colleagues, but also Albanians who were there, because we didn't dare being fully happy. On the other side, we said, "Is it normal for us not to be as happy as those in the other cities?"

We went to Pristina. You know, there was a totally different atmosphere there. Because here, you couldn't even go near the bridge, nor shoot or be so happy. As for every liberation day. We don't even have a liberation day to celebrate here. And when we went there, somehow, we kinda felt jealous. On the other hand, we were happy because people should be happy, but we also felt guilty because we couldn't be totally happy. I cried as a child and that is why I am saying that I cannot describe it otherwise, because I felt everything on that day.

And I don't know. You return home and back to reality. Did anything change for us? Nothing. The other day, after the independence declaration, you still weren't able to return home. There were still incidents. Hope still existed. I mean, if we return again, I mean, everything we did, we did it for the people and with the people. Since life didn't get better and independence didn't improve the quality of life nor... So, however the euphoria continued and the expectations... for us there was no change. At all. I mean...

And this is the fear we experienced that day... maybe it [independence] will happen without that part [the North]. And today, for example, even though human relations have improved, there are not so many incidents, there are a lot more people coming and going, I mean, Serbs coming to the South, but however, it is another reality. It is not the same as everywhere in Kosovo. There is still the fear that something can happen to you when you go to the other side. I don't know, it is still here, the impossibility to return to your home. There, where you always wanted to return. I don't know. But at the same time, we don't have the luxury to give up and be pessimistic.

So, by excluding the impossible, you see other opportunities. You stand up and see other opportunities as well as the light, the light and hope that it can simply become better. And I don't know, maybe people are tired, they are really tired of waiting for so long. I mean, I see them when they say, "You know what? No independence, no Kosovo, no Serbia, nothing." I mean, all these big words that are said from Brussels and all around, they don't improve the quality of your life. We saw that Serbs, who were the biggest advocates of divisions or the others who were with us, to normalize, they changed their approach because politics got them tired. They are really tired.

And maybe this is the hope and the opportunity that we see. Because of the tiredness of both sides and the instrumentalization of people, maybe this is the best opportunity to do... to turn it the way it is turned, it will never return here, I mean, we are convinced now. But, maybe to have a kind of normal life, not to have the direct fear, maybe that is my hope...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can we talk about the awards you have been given as a peace activist?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did it come to there? What kind of awards are they?

Valdete Idrizi: The first international award was in 2008. Actually, I was nominated at the end of 2007. It was the [International] Woman of Courage Award, given by the *State Department* [English]. For the first I was studying in Novi Sad, the Master's program was in Managing of Conflicts. And somebody from the American Embassy, back then, the American Office, called me. She said, "I am Afërdita, do you have two minutes?" I said, "Can you call me later because I am busy?" You know, I was... she said, "Yes."

She called me. She said, "Valdete, we as an office, there is an award given by the Secretary of State," she said, "For a non-American woman. It is the most prestigious award given to recognize the contribution to peacebuilding and the promotion of women." And I said, "Ok." To be honest, I had never heard about that award. She said... and I had never collaborated with them before. I hadn't applied, I never had applied for projects at the Embassy... I mean, I didn't have any collaboration because I didn't know them. She said, "We thought, we want to nominate you for that award," she said, "for the great work you are doing in Mitrovica with all the communities for peace building."

"Uh," I said, "Thank you!" I said, "That's very good," you know. Honestly, I felt really good. Then I was reminded that she had been part of a delegation once and I had presented the work done with Albanians and Serbs and we had discussed it, but it had not registered it in my mind. She only told me later. And I forgot that day and I told them, "Mhmm...My colleagues," because we were all from the Balkans and the Middle East, I said, "They called me like this and that, but that was it," I said, "Enough." And I said, "Thank you, there are many women in Kosovo." I had my own list of women who inspired me. Super. I totally forgot.

Two months later when she came, she said, "The official wants to meet you," the American who was in charge of public relations. Alright, I went. It was my first time at the Embassy. I met and talked to him. Alright. Then I totally forgot about that. Then they called me to notify that I was in the shortlist together with three other women. Because all the embassies in the world nominate one. It was a pretty rough competition. But I didn't know and I didn't even have time because we had a lot of work those days, and I wasn't thinking about awards. Then I thought that it was over with that and this was enough...I felt very proud, you know.

When I returned, they gave me the news. The Ambassador herself. They played a game with me, they said, "Somebody wants to talk about projects with you." And then they said, "You are the winner. Can you go to America to take the award?" Wow, it was a lot, I had a lot of responsibility, I experienced it as a big responsibility. Encouragement, of course, for the work that I had done until that time, but at the same time, I was happy, you know. Because I couldn't imagine how was it that I, among eight women in the world, was being given that award. Somehow... all my family was happy, I mean, I was living with my mother, my brother and his wife.

And my whole family was happy. Because they said, "Don't make it a big deal, only with your family and friends." The staff here got crazy, they were so happy. What made me really happy is that they

didn't experience it as my award only, but as theirs too. I mean, all those with whom I worked, because that was who I am. I wasn't only one Valdete. It happened because of me, but I was all of them together. And that made me happy because somehow they accepted this award. And then I went to America to receive it, and there I experienced all the possible feelings...I thought of my father who for example, some times ago when I was little... we would look at a house, let's say the White House in a movie, and he would say, "This? You will go there."

You know, I thought about all of that. And of course, when we talk about work, it helped me a lot because I got very famous, I became famous because it was right after the declaration of independence, a peace award given to a woman, you know. And I was the first from Europe to be given it, you know, nobody had won it before. Not to talk about the Balkans. And it was very well covered in the media. Our leaders started accepting me to meetings and congratulating me and somehow in a way recognizing my work as well.

And this was maybe the greatest success because it helped me realize some of the projects more easily. The big barriers or attacks somehow minimized because, "Ha! Now America has recognized her." I was also a honourable guest of the President of America back then and for that time it was a big privilege. All our work, all those years, all that journey was finally recognized by someone. And I would say, how come the most powerful man in the world is telling me, "Thank you for contributing to the world peace," when that is my obligation, you know?

This is something I consider an obligation, to work for my county. Somehow, of course it made me feel very proud, as well as all the people around me. Then, after this, some other awards followed. Another year, 2009 there is the Soroptimist Peace Prize which is given by the Soroptimist group, from the European Federation. And it came at the best moment, because that award, besides the recognition... because the Congress that had been held in Amsterdam where I had the main speech... especially after independence, and what was waiting ahead for our country and I mean the processes...

And I had the chance to represent my work in front of, I mean, there were one thousand women in that hall from all the countries in the world. Because I was nominated by the Pristina Soroptimist Club. They knew me through the first award and the work that I had done, also many interviews and they simply thought that I was decent for that award. When I went there, together with the award I received twenty thousand euros. And to tell you why I am saying that, that money came at the best possible moment, because the School of Rock was just founded at that time and we were suffering from a financial crisis and we were at risk to lose our location, in the Women's Center we received two negative answers and so on.

You know, when that money came, *bre*, it made all them stand up. Because I immediately told them, I sent it directly to the organization, we found a place. At that time, even if ten times the amount of that money came later, it would not have had the same effect. So, it is maybe bad to think about the money, but it was a very good surprise because it went exactly there, which was the reason why I took the award. Because I didn't take it as Valdete, but together with the youth, women, and the work that they had done. And when I told them that, you know that I said that it came at the best time possible.

This award after the other one, and I mean, it was a big privilege. I am very thankful to all those who nominated me because I really think that there are many women who deserved the award and who have done much more than I did, also the generations before me and so on. And I felt really, really

proud. That is why I feel responsible, because you know, there are many women who deserved it, but I took it, and now I have to maintain it. I have to work, I have to work even more.

Lately, in 2016 there was another award. This came as a very big surprise, the International Women in Television, Film and Screen-Based Media Prize, this is how it is called *WIFTS Peace Prize 2016*. I hadn't heard about it either, I even asked myself, "What do I have to do with television?" But Arta Dobrosi called me, the actress whom I really love. I thought that she needed me for some material, a documentary or a movie. I mean, "What can I do for you?" Because I really love her. We met. She said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I am working for CiviKos, I am leading it. We are growing," I said, "as an organization. We have been pretty successful. There are some challenges and problems as well."

I said, "Half of me," I said, "Is working," I said. I was a mentor of girls for peace, Albanian and Serbs. I said, "The other half of me." Because we had began with the Academy of Women Dialogue for young girls. And I said, "I am still in the Mitrovica Forum, leading it." I said. "These are volunteer jobs, half of me." I said, "And my other half is working for CiviKos." She said, "That's so good." Then she said, "You know what, there is an award." I thought that she was talking about herself, I was like, "Wow," I said, "That's so good." I thought she was talking about herself. I was so happy.

Then she said, "No," she said, "For you." I said, "Why me?" When I said that, she said, "How come you are asking why, you just told me what you are currently doing." I said, "No, that's for the movie." And it was really, really, I don't know...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did she nominate you or did she give you the news?

Valdete Idrizi: No, she gave me the news. But she told me, "I have," she said, "no say in this. I am only one of the people who gave information about you when they asked for it." Of course she did, she was happy and she gave them the information. Maybe she was the one to be blamed. But also somebody else, there was a producer who had been here during the Bridge Film Fest for example, he stayed here for a week. We talked about work and I told him about the situation. And he had been that second person. I didn't know anything... I hadn't even heard about that organization.

And so last year, I went to London and received the award. Being among all the women I had seen on television, you know, in movies... among famous actresses, producers, directors. I don't know how I felt there, I was like, "Huh." It was very, very, very good. But maybe the gratitude, the gratitude that I had from the community and the people, that is what I care about fanatically. These make me become a better person and a devoted worker. Because for example, last year they surprised me in Cerajë, in my village as well.

They simply gave me an award for the work that I have done. And I am really young to receive awards, you know, I consider that somebody older than I am should receive them, someone with a life and professional background... They made me cry because I never lived there. We went there as many times as we wanted to. Then, the Mitrovica youth as well as civil society... So, I am really, really... I am lucky.

And at the same time I am very thankful to all of them. They simply made me do my work in a better way because I took them as a big responsibility. Besides, I mean, the pride... somehow I wanted to give a message through that fame that we are all Valdete. And as much as I could, I used it to give the

message that really, if somebody wants, believes, insists and loves, you know, their people and country, it is not easy, but one must not give up.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Here we can finish the interview, but I want to make sure that... if you have anything else to tell us that... I mean, something that is necessary to be said? But you don't have to, you know. Everything you told us was very interesting.

Valdete Idrizi: Don't...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You have more stories about people, and if you have left anything aside, this is the moment when we can return to something more specific? I mean, to tell us about the initiative for divided cities...

Valdete Idrizi: Yes.

Erëmira Krasniqi: Is it something that is...

Valdete Idrizi: it is very important, especially that. I knew, you know that I told you that I wanted to talk about it. It is especially....For example the idea of the Forum of Cities in Transition. In 2008, I met a professor, Borego Mali, who is a person who lived in divided cities...during the apartheid in South Africa, and Boston. In fact he was originally from there. We were to Northern Ireland and he told us that idea and somehow he opened my eyes. I said, he said, "Maybe Mitrovica has to be," he said, "But it is problematic because the Southern and Northern municipalities don't recognize each other after the Independence declaration and so on."

The Northern and Southern municipalities didn't recognize each other. They said, "Illegal municipality," they said, "The municipality of Serbia," I mean in the North, I mean, they considered each other illegal. But being someone who is known and active and accepted by both sides, I said, "I am in a pretty good position to be able to convince those from the North as well as those from the South to be part of the Forum of Cities in Transition." Because it was a condition that there should be municipalities, I mean, municipalities in our case.

And somehow I immediately said, "Yes." I said, "Yes, *we can do it.*" [English]. Without thinking about how I would convince them. And I saw that as a city...and I knew the benefit. Because when they told me about some cities, seeing Berlin there as well, I mean, other cities that had always been divided and got united. Or Northern Ireland, you know, how the peace process went, you know, I had read about them during my studies but I was also interested. And when I came to Mitrovica, first to the Mayor in the South, I said, "There is an idea." I made it look a big deal in his eyes. In fact, it was but... I had the first information.

I also tried to go to the North, first through my colleagues. I found someone from the media, someone from the civil society and someone from business, and we managed to create a delegation. In 2009 we went to Boston, to the University of Massachusetts, and that is where the Forum of Countries in Transition was established, imagine, Mitrovica was as a founding city of that. And since there were two Mayors, two representatives of the municipality as well as other officials, plus we also had people from the central government, we had the Minister Bajram Rexhepi, Sadri Ferati, Oliver Ivanović, Ljubiša Petrović, these were all political representatives and then we were from civil society.

In order not to have any problems with each other as far as the narrative that they would follow goes, they entrusted this part to us from the civil society. And it was a good decision, because when we presented it, we were so enthusiastic and without having the consent of all of them, we showed up and said, "We are the first city volunteering to organize the inaugural conference of cities in transition in 2010." Oh, we didn't even think about what that meant, I mean all the work and the responsibility and the time we needed to organize it. I mean, in 2010 there were local elections in Serbia, and they were organized in Northern Mitrovica as well. And there are always troubles during elections time.

We were waiting for around one hundred delegations from all around the world, whom we needed to help with the visa and other papers. We had to prepare the program and make sure that everything was alright. Furthermore, there was no canalization in the Cultural Center where we were planning to organize it because it was more suitable for those from the North as well as those from the South, and the toilets were all demolished. When we said, "Yes," we didn't think about these problems. But then slowly we sat, wrote and told the secretary in Boston, "We have these problems. We have to talk to various donors." Trust me, we managed to get around 350 thousand euros.

And as a Forum, it is a volunteer team, it is not registered as an organization, we signed some principles as a basis on which we work, simply, not to call it Kosovo Metohija or Serbia, but to focus on the city and its inhabitants. It was difficult to reach all those, but we managed. And you know, the conference that was about to begin the next day, I mean on that date, the floor was not dried out yet, because we had just fixed it, cleaned it. I mean, we had worked on it all night long, and it was fixed one day before.

And it was one of the best conferences that could ever happen. When I say one of the best, I am talking about the presence of two Serbian leaders who were part of the panel and who were in competition for the North, I mean, in the election. For the first time, we had the police, the commanders of both police stations, for the first time they directly faced each other in a panel, because we had never seen them together before. There was a panel of people who didn't know each other, all the videos are on the website of...

And we managed to have delegations of many other divided places, I mean, from Kirkuk in Iraq, from two cities in Northern Ireland, Belfast and Derry, Londonderry. We had Nicosia in Cyprus, Mostar. Then also Berlin, Nigeria, Kaduna. I mean, we had all other places, Beirut, Jerusalem, Haifa, I mean as cities. Later they came from Ramallah. So, all the cities who were divided or that we called cities in transitions, or had been divided in another phase.

Why am I mentioning this is because it is very important, because on one side being part of civil society, I mean, this was the only way you could move forward because you were recognized by both parts of the city which didn't recognize each other. Secondly, we benefited a lot as a city from other programs that followed. For example, the police in the South and the North went to Northern Ireland many times, with programs and trainings that they don't have in the curricula here. I mean, how to react when pride [parades] are organized, because there were no prides here while they were pretty famous there. They exchanged experiences.

There were simultaneous visits to Israel, young people from Mitrovica, volunteers went to various places. We managed to develop other projects, the renovation of the conferences hall. The Forum still continues, every city takes some tasks as an obligation to contribute to the unity of the city, or I mean, the improvement of the city. So, this was something, being part of the world, as a city, and you slowly

see it, I mean, it takes time to realize the city, but it is not impossible. It gave us a light of hope that much more can be done.

On the other hand we managed to simply bring the mayors together, because they didn't even know each other. So, I mean it was, we used that way to benefit as a city, you know, not individually.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Does the collaboration continue to be close?

Valdete Idrizi: Yes, it continues, even though the collaboration between municipalities has weakened these last two year, because there was negligence on the part of the municipalities. However, as a delegation, as civil society, we managed to go to Lebanon [Beirut], which is one of the hosting cities, and we managed to help them in the process. We showed up to help them in projects concerning women empowerment, to use practices from here and help them. as much as we could, I mean, because we didn't have support from the municipality this time.

But there have been ups and downs, so I hope that next year Mitrovica will be in a better position and with greater possibility to share capacity, and also getting funds, why not. For the betterment of citizens, national communities. So, it was one of the best experiences. We managed to be a host of the cities in 2013. The Youth Forum of Cities in Transition, because there were young people from Mitrovica who won scholarships to go to America to study.

One from the North and the other from the South, they showed that we have good qualities, a commitment, good students. And they proved themselves as youth leaders who are as enthusiastic as we, the older ones, they said that they would organize the Youth Forum here. And it resulted to be a successful Forum with youth delegations who came to Mitrovica. And we, the older ones only shared our experience with them and tried to encourage them.

So, it is encouraging, and I am sure it will continue in the future because they won't be able to stop, I mean, an individual, a male mayor, or a woman mayor, won't be able to stop them. But sometimes, there are cases when it gets slow. We have seen other municipalities and we haven't seen the support of one individual, but the pressure from other individuals made the progress possible. I will continue working as a volunteer in this Forum and simply put pressure to do our duty, because we can benefit from other's experiences, to become maybe like Berlin.

Because it is encouraging seeing people from Berlin, "Wow, wow." Or Northern Ireland, the Derry bridge [The Peace Bridge in Derry], for example, when we walked there and they told us, or the movies that I have seen, or when they told me that it was impossible to cross it, just like ours. And then we crossed, we walked across. This is... the Forum, I love this initiative because it has been very beneficial for us.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Let's finish it here.

Valdete Idrizi: Okay.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Thank you very much!

Valdete Idrizi: Thank you because I have never told so much in my life (all laugh). And especially maybe for the first time, I have never believed that I would be able to take all that out, I haven't thought about it at all, but...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You didn't have when...

Valdete Idrizi: No, exactly. But I am happy with it... *Thank you* [English].

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Thank you!

