

# Oral History Kosovo

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## INTERVIEW WITH MIHANE SALIHU-BALA

Pristina | Date: March 9, 2018

Duration: 130 minutes

Present:

1. Mihane Salihu-Bala (Speaker)
2. Aurela Kadriu (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.*

## Part One

**Aurela Kadriu:** Please introduce yourself, name, last name, and if you can please tell us something about your early childhood memories. Your family background, the setting you grew up in?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** I am Mihane Nartilë Salihu Bala. I was born in Pristina and grew up in the Kodra e Trimave [The Brave's Hill] neighborhood, formerly known as Vranjevc. I come from an ordinary family, to say conditionally. I am the oldest child of the family, we are six children from my mother. One special thing about me is that I grew up at my mother's house, and this mindset, having happened in the '70s and '80s, somehow carried out my personal formation. Because compared to the mindset of that time, growing up at your mother's house was different, and this is what characterizes my childhood. Otherwise, I was a spoiled child, very dynamic, rebellious and curious. But because of the circumstances that I grew up in, there were not many relatives close to us.

And with the absence of maternal aunts and paternal uncles, we found a replacement somewhere else, at our extended cousins of my mother's family...and this is how I generally grew up. I mean, being the first child in the family, with the pressure of thinking that you have to become good, courageous, everything, because other siblings will follow your behavior. There is one motto that always led me, "Wherever the first wheel goes, the others follow." And maybe it is not a pleasant view to have, but this was generally the mindset in the '70s when I was born and when I grew up. I went to the first grade in the school year '79-'80, at the Zenel Hajdini elementary school..

**Aurela Kadriu:** Can you please just stop a little...Excuse me, who else was part of your family?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** In my family, there were my parents, and we had...My three sisters, my two brothers and I. That means, we are six children. We lived at our mother's house. My mother remained without her parent at a very early age. She was an only child so her inheritance was, this is very interesting...Her father, my grandfather was a survivor, a war hostage from Germany, with a different ethnic mixture than others. After returning, after the Second World War when he returned from the concentration camps that were in Germany, he met and married my grandmother. She also had a very interesting life experience too, she was a Second World War survivor too. And they only had my mother, the only child.

My mother grew up in the village of Prapashticë, the Gollak highland. Even though they are not from there originally, but they moved a lot. When she was 16, they moved to Pristina. My mother got married when she turned 18, and I was born around four-five years later. What is more interesting is that the day I was born, my mother and my father returned, actually it was more of a decision of my father, they returned to take care of my mother's parents because they were ill and didn't have...so

that is why I grew up at my mother's house. In fact, the day I was born, even though my parents weren't that happy, even though my parents were so excitedly waiting for me, but that day also marked the day that my father left his parents to go to live and take care of his wife's parents.

And we are talking about the '70s, when this mindset was stigmatized by society because sons had to take care of their parents. But, because of the circumstances that my mother had no brother or sister...So, I remember my grandparents very little, because they died after some time. I mean, I was very little when they died, two years and a half, maybe three. And this is it, as far as childhood goes.

What I remember from my childhood is the absolute freedom to play in the garden. We had a small house with a garden. Our world inside that fenced garden, because the walls weren't high, but there were some tin fences. That is how the metallic fences were at that time. Not only for my house, the house where I lived, but the houses of the whole neighborhood. There were either some very old dividing walls, or these tin fences. What I remember mostly are the small gates, not leading to the street, but gates in the walls connecting neighbors with each other. In a way, you could go from one house to the second, third, fourth, fifth, through people's gardens.

Maybe as a child, it was very interesting because we caused trouble and escaped through those gates and we didn't have to go to the street, even though the street was a narrow average Pristina street with mud, not asphalted. We didn't even have a canalization system, we are talking about that time...And as a child, I never thought about the reason why there were these small gates, but I knew that women from different houses used them to go from one house to another, to either have tea or hang out with each other... a kind of socializing.

The small gates are a symbol of my childhood. It was a different communication, movement gate. Because when we went somewhere, there was usually the main entrance where depending on where you went, the doors were high, closed, and they had a kind of fastener and we had to knock, then somebody would open the door. The families that kept pets, dogs, it was very problematic to knock on the main door because we had to look whether the dog was tied or not. And that is what I remember mostly from my childhood, the small gates leading from one house to another.

Why I mentioned the small gates is because only later in '85, '86, '87...Each time when there were protests when I was actively engaged wishfully or not, because it could be that I was caught in the protest on the street on my way home from school...the small gates were the saviors of those of us who didn't have much of physical strength to confront, to say conditionally, the police's torture. Because people used those small gates to save people to go...

And I remember the '80s when in my neighborhood, in the street where I lived, we usually had problems because the police came to raid the houses, be it because of the activism of the people who lived there or for different things. And only a whistle was enough for all the small gates to open and as the police was inspecting at the main entrance, the youth, most of the time men, escaped through those small gates.

This is an interesting memory which I haven't gotten to talk about earlier. And the positive effect, maybe this has to do with people's perceptions. In '91, '92, '93 when the police pressure was greater to collect the youth and take them to the military service...for me, these small gates were the saviors of many people because the action to collect the youth started in another street, and the gates would immediately open so people could move from one part of the street to the other.

The institution, to say conditionally, of the small gates no longer exists on the street and neighborhood where I grew up. New construction has taken place, there is a different situation. Unfortunately, none of them were preserved. If you look at it from this perspective, it looks like it was very functional, even though at that time it had a completely different meaning. I mean, it was exclusively used for close relations between neighbors and they were maybe only used by women mostly because they were at home and the street was somehow a forbidden space for women. Because, two women talking at the main entrances on the street was not very welcomed behavior and they were immediately labelled. And, socially, women survived through the socialization of small gates, which didn't have such a meaning at that time.

What I remember from childhood is also that we had fun with so little. We had fun with the dolls that we made ourselves out of paper. I remember the game called Partisans and Germans, back then it was very popular, only later did I realize that it was a kind of dogma, it was a frustration for us children. But, those were things that everybody did that way.

I remember the game called Aunts. Somehow, without being aware of it, through the game we learned about how you have to behave as a woman. You have to listen, to be careful, you have to cook, wait for people, clean, wash. These are things that I remember and also hand crafts. The women sitting to work with the *xherxhef*<sup>1</sup> and the needle, even though here in Pristina you call the round thing *kasnak*. I remember my paternal grandmother, she also worked with knits. The wool socks, vests and blouses, even though we didn't call them blouses but jumpers at that time. And the overall pants, they were interesting how they were handmade.

Why I remember that is because they dealt with housework the whole day, they took care of the children, of cooking and cleaning, And the moment they stopped to have a coffee or something, when children went to take naps or sleep at night, they would take the knits and knit. They created very interesting works, handcrafts the value of which is lost nowadays. I remember the table covers, or other different things that were worked with such passion, with all the colors. And the way the needle made noise like *tik tik tik* {onomatopoeic}, that's how it worked. I remember this mostly because maybe there was no other entertainment.

And yes, the radio volume. The radio volume was always present during my childhood. Because there was television, but there either weren't good programs for children or there were programs and news that...My mother would turn the radio on, I remember Radio Kukësi as a child and later when I grew up, when I went to second or third grade, I also remember Radio Pristina. This is my childhood, and I also remember that we were so many students in one classroom, maybe there were 45-46 of us in the first grade. And we were all dressed very simply, we were confused in the first grade. We were confused because of the teacher and everything. Because they had told us, "You can't make noise at school, you can make a little noise at home, but not at school."

This is something that I remember, maybe there is another moment, recently it was cold, there was ice...I remember long winters in Pristina. And when the whole neighborhood, all the children of the neighborhood would organize from the substation to the railway in Hani i Dilit, they spilled water on it so it would freeze during the night. It was the slides marathon. We called them *sliquka*, they were some small sliding skates, small slides for the foot which we made out of plastic packs, potentially of

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<sup>1</sup> *Xherxhef*, also found as *kasnak* or *kosnak* is a wood round used for stem stitching embroidery.

Coca Cola or Pepsi or Jupi, I don't know what they were. Even though, the main concern was to make the best slides, to find the plastic pack somewhere, because they were hard to find at that time. We had to cut it right, spill hot water on it in order to be able to bend it the way we wanted to and make them slide, then tie them on our foot. So, there would be a line of children, maybe 150-200 children.

We used a space which today it takes you two minutes on foot to go through, but for us it seemed long because it was around 200 meters downhill. I remember that we would wait in line to slide down the ice. And there was the crowd, the screams...I also remember that there weren't so many cars, and when the train would pass by...Eh, when the train would pass by, there was the five minute silence, nobody moved because we were afraid we wouldn't manage to stop before the railway and there was the fear, because the train is passing, you know, it might crush you.

Those were interesting moments. Something else I remember is the noise we made before going inside, or in the morning before going outside, then before going inside because we didn't want to return home. Then I remember the women of my street, who would say words to us, "May you this, may you that..." I know that they didn't have negative intentions, it was just an expression of frustration. Because poor them, they had to work the whole day and then collect the children at night. But it was a trouble to return home at night because we wanted to stay outside, but there was no lighting on our street, I am talking about maybe until I turned nine, then the situation changed.

**Aurela Kadriu:** You mentioned that your grandparents were Second World War survivors, can you tell us a little about this part? Maybe the memories you heard from your mother, since you told us that you didn't get to live with your grandparents for a very long time?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** He was taken hostage during the Second World War. He was very young, around fifteen or sixteen. And he survived thanks to his looks, to the fact that he was tall. And when somebody asked him about his nationality, an Albanian who was with him told him, "He is a Muhammadan."<sup>2</sup> But his name was Adam, and from that time, he was Adem. So, he survived thanks to someone who told them that he was muhammadan, because he was whiter, he was different.

What I remember from the story I was told about the survival of my grandfather is that when they passed Slovenia, because they were caught in Bosnia, they were escorted. When they passed Slovenia, because my grandfather spoke the Slavic languages, but not the Germanic ones. They ate non-boiled potatoes and survived in various ways. After crossing the border with Slovenia, going towards Austria at that time...after that time, my grandfather was considered lost, his family was mourning him, they knew that he was dead because they didn't have any kind of communication with him for five years, they didn't know he was alive. My grandfather's struggles are that he ended up in the part that was later known as the Republic of the Eastern Germany, the federal one.

Something else I remember from what I was told is that in the last minute, a high German soldier asked him to take his daughter to the federal part, which was under American control. And the story that the cart went through hot butane, tar. I mean, there was a street where nobody was supposed to pass, and he did go through it. Then he returned to Kosovo, he found his family, first he found his sisters. He returned to live in the place where he grew up.

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<sup>2</sup> *Muhammadan*, refers to Muslims, derives from Muhammad, the Muslim prophet.

What is very interesting that he was never compensated for the status of the war hostage in Germany. I mean, he died in '76, '76 and nobody received material compensation because he was a war hostage in Germany. Why this happened, I don't know. It is not that there wasn't written testimony or...but, such is life. Maybe the politics, maybe a different situation that we don't know about. What we know is that he didn't have a pension or material compensation. Even though, people who were war hostages at that time were delivered compensation in the former Yugoslavia.

I don't remember much of his stories and my mother doesn't talk about them much. Maybe she had a reason, she wanted to spare us from the pain, emotion, stress and fear. But, the stories were mainly these painful ones about how he survived his days and so on, how he learned German very fast.

While my grandmother, my maternal grandmother, the stories that I was told are about how she survived the war, how she was a war and violence survivor. The violence that she was prone to at the family where she stayed at that time, how soldiers of various formations mistreated women and men, they burned their houses and took their clothes. They robbed and tortured them in various ways...These are not written and this is the worst part, because usually when stories about the deceased are told, people don't say anything good nor bad about them. Add to it the fact that my mother didn't have a brother or a sister, so it was something she didn't want to bother her children with sad stories. She tried to survive, simply tried to survive under the circumstances that she had. And this is the story that comes from the past.

While my paternal grandfather was a soldier at that time, he survived the Bar massacre<sup>3</sup> and the Srem front.<sup>4</sup> But he was never compensated for that, because in the files that were made, it says that he was a soldier of King Zog. That contradicts that follows, follows, follows people, individuals. Being a survivor of the Bar massacre, managing to escape to Istria and then being a survivor of the Srem Frontline as well, which was a big war...and remaining without anything in the end, this is, I would say, this is the Calvary cross of people who carried it.

And then exactly because they say that he was a soldier of King Zog, he doesn't have any privileges, he doesn't have a workplace, he is not accepted within the system. And his children suffer the consequences. I mean, we are talking about great poverty of that time, not only for him but for everyone. And the lack of opportunity to educate his children because those who weren't aligned with the party, couldn't educate their children. In little words, this is how it was.

Then my father is the fourth child, the second child from a family with five brothers and three sisters, among eight children of my paternal grandparents. But he didn't go to school due to the material opportunities of his family, so he served for a family. And when he turned 16 and stopped serving his patron, he started working in construction and then started working at the railways. That was the time when he started getting education, there were the special schools for workers.

My father knew...maybe there isn't an equivalent of this now, but he was a professional in railway transport. I mean, he finished schools, he finished...at that time, they had a mandatory education and exams. Today, he would be recognized as an engineer of railway transport. But they didn't have this

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<sup>3</sup> Also known as the massacre of Tivar (currently Bar, Montenegro), was the mass killing of Albanian recruits from Kosovo by Yugoslav partisan forces in 1945.

<sup>4</sup> The Sirmian (Srem) Srem's front was affront created by retreating German troops in the North West of Yugoslavia. at the end of October 1944. It was broken in April 1945.

tile back then. And what he found interesting was that my father was fired from a leading position due to his religious beliefs. He wanted to keep his religion and declared that he won't give up his religion for the party and so they didn't promote him, in fact, they removed him from the leading position, he was the leader of locomotives, and from that, he became a simple worker, working in maintenance.

And that's how it continued and after a long time, he returned to work again, but not in his profession, not as the leader of the locomotives. He worked in the railways for a long time and in the end, I mean, after '99, he remained unemployed as most of the people. After the war, he didn't get any pension or anything and died taking all the life concerns with him. I mean, without a pension, without having the chance to keep himself from his work, even though he had worked for 45 years. That's it.

While my mother, my mother has finished the elementary school. She was born in '50. And she dealt with our growth from the very first day. I mean, she was the main motivation for us to grow up and get educated, maybe her only pleasure in life that can be measured with something is that her six children have finished secondary school and university. Three of them also hold master's degrees while three others only the bachelor's. But as every mother, she is never happy with our achievements and she has expectations that her children deserve the best.

Now she is disappointed because most of us are unemployed (laughs), and that is a burden for our mother, it is a burden that maybe she didn't have the chance to do more. Even though it is not her fault, but as a mother, she feels that burden. She wants her children to be better, to have more, I often joke with her, since she has nephews and nieces, her heart is full. They are the best for them, she never shouts at them, she never says, "No." to them. She never says, "Don't!" to them. For us, it was the complete opposite.

She often says that we don't understand it and we will only see things differently when we come to her position. But seen from my perspective, for me it is very strange how a person who was very strict can become so soft with her grandchildren. She allows them to do whatever they want, this is maybe the change that I will only be able to notice with time.

**Aurela Kadriu:** What was your father's religious that he was fired because of it?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** My family comes from a mixed family. My father died as a Muslim and was fired from the party for fasting during Ramadan. My mother is an Albanian Jew. In my family, we grew up with all the traditional religions. Most of us children are baptized, so maybe, I would say we are an interesting mixture of different cultures. Because at the end of the day, religion is very individual, but considering that we grew up in a setting that was officially different and unofficially different, the chance to choose for us was bigger, but it was also more difficult. Even though, growing up in an environment where your cousins are from another religious belief, and you have the chance to make another choice isn't quite...back then it wasn't quite accepted.

But at the end of the day, now everybody speaks the same language and big changes have taken place so the acceptance is bigger. Even though, right now, there are a lot of differences. Because at that time, we all ate in the same family, there were various holidays in which we would gather. The holiday didn't matter much, for us it was important to get together. Now the protocol is a bit different, but we are still good (laughs), we are still good.



**Aurela Kadriu:** Can you tell us how is it to grow up in a mixed family, even though [religion] is individual, I believe it also had a cultural effect?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** For me it was interesting because we had so many holidays. Nothing was imposed on us, this is something I have to emphasize, we were free to choose to be whoever we wanted to be. There were times we were hesitant, we were afraid of the people surrounding us, I mean, that we wouldn't be able to manifest our religion...But I want to say that I am thankful to my mother who didn't put pressure on us. She didn't tell us, "You either have to be this or that..." But she conformed with the cultural mindset of the people around us. And I understand her, poor her she needed to survive and didn't put pressure on us.

I remember various holidays, especially Eid, the whole neighborhood would bake baklava, so would my mother. Then on other holidays, my mother cooked more special food, but she didn't make a big deal out of it, so it was interesting. What I remember are the September holidays. The holiday of the new bread when we boiled grapes and wheat and all that. For us, it was interesting, "Oh, the grandparents will come..." And it was interesting. Only later did we realize that it was a whole different tradition, baking the bread, splitting it with hands, boiling the wheat, boiling and breaking the nuts. Because they didn't break the nuts for Eid, they broke them in order to use them for the baklava, but they didn't put them on the *sofra*<sup>5</sup>. You know, I grew up in Vranjevc, we didn't have tables like we do nowadays.

We were given the space to research, to know the religion in general, and it helped us, it made it possible for us to make our own choice. For my father it was, "You are an Albanian..." and that is where the conversation was over. I mean, "There is a God, there are the people, we used to be something different, now we are like this..." but at the end, there is the tradition that is stronger than religion.

I started to research religion at a very young age. First because of atheism and rebellion, then because I was interested in seeing the differences and similarities within certain religion beliefs. So, all the books were part of the culture in our house. Even though they were often not translated into Albanian. So the debate about religion was always very hot. We didn't oppose each other, but we looked at different ways of theological explanation at that time.

So this is the reason why I started, and why I wanted to know more. Today I have two children who are baptized in the church. But I won't necessarily force them to keep my choice. I will talk to them about different religions and give them the chance to choose. They are little now so we don't have a practice that would make them think that they either have to be in this or in that just because their parents go...

## Part Two

**Aurela Kadriu:** Was there a Jewish community at that time?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** There were very few Jews at that time so the consoled community as such... but we weren't part of it at any time. It was followed more through the tradition and through other things,

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<sup>5</sup> Low round table for people to gather at communal dinners, sitting on the floor.



but not in an organized way. Because there was no synagogue. There wasn't a big family connection, I mean, there wasn't, they didn't have... Later when I started researching due to curiosity, I found out that there was one, but they left in the '70s.

I mean, they weren't organized. I mean, there were individuals who were part of different families be it through marriages, inheritance or through other ways. But those who spoke Albanian were very few.

**Aurela Kadriu:** Can you tell us about the holidays atmosphere, the so many holidays that you had in your family? Your memories...

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** I told you, it was interesting. When Eid came, everybody baked baklava, so did my mother. There was the other holiday and we had a different cake...or the new bread holiday, we had boiled wheat, we had grape. It was interesting because we gathered and not because of a certain holiday. I remember two other moments in the family, the circumcision ceremony for my brothers, and the moment of becoming a woman (smiles). The moment when the menstrual cycle begins for the girl, we had a special dinner, a special dinner. I remember this. All my sisters and I had a special dinner. My brothers had a dinner, but not a religious ceremony. This was something to mark ourselves within the family. I mean, it was something special.

And the nuts cakes. They were...but they weren't baklavas. Then the apples with honey, they were another moment which we didn't... "Today we have apple with honey..." But for example, we didn't drink wine in my family, we didn't use wine. So, it was an interesting mixture.

**Aurela Kadriu:** Can you tell us about the time you started school, this is another stage of socialization?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** The socialization was difficult in that circle, because we lived at my mother's house. The circle didn't accept us well. I had to fight for survival at school. I had to study a lot and become better, there was not big pressure until the fourth-five grade maybe, except about the way I dressed. I mean, we were all children of working class or the unemployed of the time. I am always speaking about those who grew up at *Kodra e Trimave*, I am not speaking about those who grew up in the city center, which even though not so far, was a very different lifestyle because of the economical conditions, because of family adjustments, the relations within the family...I mean, for me, the first year of high school is the one where social changes started for me.

I went to the Ivo Lola Ribar gymnasium,<sup>6</sup> which is now called the Sami Frashëri gymnasium and it was considered an elite school, for those who were talented and were connected to the leading structures. There was no admission exam but the listing was done according to the points and the success, so I had the luck to be accepted. I was studying at the programmers' department at that time, we were the first generation of the fourth-year system in gymnasium. And I was part of a very good class, where the students were very diverse, I mean, there weren't only the children of the elite, but there were also children of simple workers, various professionals.

And I remember that since it had a great name as a gymnasium, we had to work a lot. It wasn't possible to get a two or three because you lost...the goal was to always be better. And I had the

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<sup>6</sup> A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

fortune to be part of a very good class where there were students from diverse families and circles. In my class, there were students who weren't only from Pristina but also from the surroundings, so this created a kind of balance between the rich and the poor.

I laugh a lot when I think about it now that Victor Hugo was the promoter for me, with his book *Les Misérables*. We struggled a lot, unfortunately I became part of the generation that experienced ethnic segregation at schools,<sup>7</sup> I mean, when the school is divided, when the first shift belongs to...

**Aurela Kadriu:** Excuse me, in which year did you go to high school?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** '86 - '87.

**Aurela Kadriu:** Okay.

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** '86, '87, yes, because I finished in '90, '91, I finished high school in the school year<sup>8</sup> '90, '91 and then the ethnically based segregations began. I was part of the time when the poisonings of elementary and high school students took place. I mean, I was in high school at that time. And the torments of '86, '87, '88, miners' strike, various protests. I was part of their growth and I remember the protests and demonstrations of '81 because they didn't allow us to go to school and there was noise, there was the constant alarm and the helicopters flying very close to the ground, the small airplanes or what were they...the gas, the poison that was thrown, the teargas that was thrown from the helicopters and from various forces.

Since the protest was taking place in the city center, people escaped through Vranjevc, through *Kodra e Trimave* and the police came after them throwing teargas. We were very, I was very little, I was eight, seven-eight years old but I remember it because we were bombarded with various information from the people at that time. I remember the students escaping and various students lived at our place at that time, relatives from various surroundings came to live at our place.

And I remember the students' conversations, "This is bad, this will become even worse. We have to have a republic, no it won't become a republic, no it has to be another shape..." So, I was told the story of resistance very early in my childhood. But, I started my continuous activism only later in '88, '89.

I wanted to talk about the Blood Feuds Reconciliations movement, but first there were the protests of '86, '87, the miners' strike when I was in high school. We attempted to skip classes in order to join the protests, but due to very strict rules and security, we only joined the protests after the classes. We

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<sup>7</sup> By 1991, after Slobodan Milošević's legislation making Serbian the official language of Kosovo and the removal of all Albanians from public service, Albanians were excluded from schools as well. The reaction of Albanians was to create a parallel system of education hosted mostly by private homes.

<sup>8</sup> In March 1990, after Kosovo schools were segregated along ethnic lines, thousands of Albanian students fell ill with symptoms of gas poisoning. No reliable investigation was conducted by the authorities, who always maintained no gas was used in Kosovo and the phenomenon must have been caused by mass hysteria. The authorities also impeded independent investigations by foreign doctors, and to this day, with the exception of a publication in *The Lancet* that excludes poisoning, there are only contradictory conclusions on the nature and the cause of the phenomenon. For this see Julie Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a war*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1999

were told to not remove our uniforms so that they would know who is a student and who isn't, but with or without the uniform, we joined the crowd.

I remember the protest when we were in the city center and the whole crowd was shouting, "Kaqusha, Azem," that was an interesting slogan. These are the very beginnings of my engagement...

**Aurela Kadriu:** Did you have, excuse me, before talking about your engagement in the Blood Feuds Reconciliations movement, I would like to know, as young students, were you aware of why you were protesting? Or did you join the protests because of...

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** No, no, no. The information was very good. The awareness of why it was happening was high, exactly because of the changes that took place, that started taking place in the former Yugoslavia system, which means...we were informed, I mean, we weren't...Even though the communication channels were more limited, much more limited than today, we knew why it was happening. Because however, the conversations, movements were very active at that time and the daily politics became part of our lives. I mean, we, the children, weren't excluded from the effect of the daily politics.

So we were in the streets, some of us with passion, some of us because we wanted to and some of us because we just happened to be there. Somehow, we became part of the protests. And our growth in the Pristina streets didn't happen gradually, but very quickly. Because from being very innocent, to say conditionally, we became part of the movements, of changes, even though I cannot say that we were innocent. I am speaking about my generation, starting from '81, we grew up with the fear that there would be war, there would be changes. It was a systematic way of state pressure.

And somehow this makes you have a different approach. Because, personally, starting from '81, I grew up with the fear that there would be war. And this war will explode today or tomorrow or this or that, being haunted by this idea for twenty years is not something small. I mean, as a child you grow up with the idea of the fear that there will be war. We didn't think that the war would be like the one that happened, but we always had the image of the Second World War, which followed us, be it in literature, be it at school, be it in the collective memory of the people. The continuous fear makes you grow up under its pressure.

This was also part of the protests and demonstrations of '86, '87, '88. Because when the miners' strike started, we were all 15-16 years old and we constantly were afraid of what would happen the next day. Add to that the fact that I had the luck to be in a circle of people who were students at that time, and the students thought differently. We had a lot of information, maybe not the right information, but we had a totality of information about what was happening, what was about to happen. And the Albanians were hesitant to be part of the whole system and that made us think differently, because we were excluded, we were different, we weren't part of the totality of the system.

Add to this the fact that we had very big lingual and cultural differences, maybe cultural ones were bigger. Add to this the fact of religious differences, even though they weren't emphasized, as an Albanian, you were treated as a Muslim, even though there were other religious group among Albanians, but they were very small. We were treated differently.

I remember for example, what I remember maybe is different from the perception of the time in Kosovo, is travelling to other places without borders, without passports. However, Yugoslavia was a big place, and we could take the train from Fushë Kosovë to Krajina. It was a totality, it was a change. But the moment you passed Kosovo, there was a completely different world. Even though we travelled by train or by bus, it was a completely different world. Or maybe I can make another description.

You would return from various countries in Yugoslavia, the closest big city from Pristina was Nis or Belgrade. And the first encounter in Kosovo was Merdare or Vranjevc, I mean, you come from a place with wider streets...speaking about Belgrade, it was a bigger and more developed city, and the first view of Pristina is Vranjevc. The clay houses surrounded with tin fences. Extreme poverty which was one hour or two hours from another city.

I mean, the difference was very big. Even though the city center is twenty minutes on foot from Vranjevc, but the difference was very big nevertheless. In the city center there were high buildings, which we called palaces, that's how we called the skyscrapers and only twenty minutes from that, there was extreme poverty. So, these differences were a collective and individual pressure and these differences made me a different person, I aimed, I had other goals, but I lived where I lived and...

About the question about the information, there was a lot of information. How it was transmitted and how it was perceived, accepted or used, that is another discussion. On the other hand, we have to mention the fact that at that time, we received the information through written media. Newspapers and televisions were however, controlled. But other information was verified. There wasn't fake information like nowadays because there was a filter, there was a structure and system that released the last information. But on the other hand, there was the information followed from one person to another, they were life experiences, opinions, various viewpoints...and this mixture of information was enough for us to have enough information, but not always the correct one.

And this is when the Blood Feuds Reconciliation movement begins, I was in high school. I wanted to join them and I joined them first in the neighborhood, I joined the activists in my neighborhood. For me it was interesting to be part of it as a high school student, to go to a family, or back then there were the big rooms, the *oda*,<sup>9</sup> because in Pristina we didn't have the typical *oda*, but we had a bigger room for the guests, and listening to people trying to reconcile two families. Their reactions, acceptance or non-acceptance of such a moment of mediation, everything was so interesting for me because I heard various stories. I heard two different versions of the same event, two different perceptions, two different viewpoints of the same situation.

And what impressed me mostly at that time was the way that families that were in enmity {makes quotation marks with her fingers} lived their lives. The way the family of the victim was treated and perceived by the people, how they were pushed to avenge the blood, or the family of the perpetrator on the other hand, they often lived with the feeling of guilt, shame, isolation, mock, being pushed to continue the crime. It is interesting how little these things were talked about. But there was the pride of avenging the blood, or putting the other person in conditions of social, spiritual and physical

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<sup>9</sup> Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.

isolation. And when the institution of *besa*<sup>10</sup> was explained, for example, that was for me...I read, I heard about it, but that was the first time I saw how it really works, and it was very interesting for me.

And the attempt of so many people to do something for themselves was maybe the great bend, even though I don't remember many meetings. Not many, but several meetings took place in my neighborhood, I mean, at people whom I knew, who were part of my everyday life, and I know how difficult the process was. I mean, it couldn't finished at the first time, it took two, three times, sometimes even ten times, maybe a whole night, a whole day, and those people who were part of that process were patient, courageous. This was something that I will never forget, on one hand the insistence of people on reconciling the families and on the other hand, the resistance of the families to reconciliation.

Looking at it from the perspective of today, I would explain it differently, back then we leaned on nationalism, on the greater good, on the idea that people needed to forgive because we shouldn't have such...We tried to work in the social sense within the family, but when it failed, they leaned on the national cause, on the greater good. This made the formation of...even though I might not be the best mediator, but this is an approach that marked my life. Maybe it motivated me to continue with my engagement within my neighborhood, with simple things like cleaning my street, removing the garbage that was collected in my neighborhood because of the life parallel system. The life parallel system took place in many fields.

The company for garbage collecting was working in the city, but it wasn't working in Vranjevc. And people, since they weren't aware and sometimes they were in a rush or so tired, so they started depositing their garbage in a certain part of the neighborhood. That was near the electric substation in Vranjevc, in the middle of Zenel Hajdini and Asim Vokshi elementary schools, exactly where several streets meet, people threw their garbage there. And I remember that there was a lot of garbage there and we couldn't pass through that street. When it rained, the garbage was flowing all over like canalization, when it was warm, it stank. I remember that the first gatherings of the *Lidhja Demokratike*<sup>11</sup> [Kosovo Democratic League] at that time, the *Lidhja e Shkrimtarëve* [Writers' League], the forums, the social organization of the neighborhood safety, to save the neighborhood from various police attacks, various police interventions. And I remember that the first activity where I was physically, spiritually and mentally engaged is the one for the garbage removal.

What I was impressed mostly by that day, I don't remember the date, it is so bad, is that elders, youngsters, children, women. People voluntarily brought their tractors, their carts, their shovels, brooms and everything else in order to remove the garbage from the neighborhood. I remember so many police patrols came to check what was happening, because however, we had to get special permission because we were more than five people, a group of people, we had to let the police know. I

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<sup>10</sup> In Albanian customary law, *besa* is the word of honor, faith, trust, protection, truce, etc. It is a key instrument for regulating individual and collective behavior at times of conflict, and is connected to the sacredness of hospitality, or the unconditioned extension of protection to guests.

<sup>11</sup> *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* - Democratic League of Kosovo. First political party of Kosovo, founded in 1989, when the autonomy of Kosovo was revoked, by a group of journalists and intellectuals. The LDK quickly became a party-state, gathering all Albanians, and remained the only party until 1999.

don't know how the technical part with the state was done, but I know that there were a lot of police patrols coming to see what was happening. And it was something to remember that they took a lot of photographs of us removing the garbage. This is my first engagement, and then when it started, when we remained outside the school, in '91-'92...

**Aurela Kadriu:** Can I interrupt you a little more? What were the main slogans of '88, '86, '87, '88?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** No, no, I don't remember them. I remember, "*Kaqusha, Azem, jemi gati përherë.*" [Kaqusha, Azem, we are always prepared], it was an imitation of the socialism slogan beyond the border [in Albania]. They had something to do with... I don't remember Democracy being mentioned. I don't remember, maybe there was another slogan, "*Minatorë jemi me ju, Trepça është e jona.*" [Miners we are with you, Trepça is ours], the mother of all slogans was, "*Kosova Republikë*" [Kosovo Republic]. There were other slogans, "*Të drejta, më shumë të drejta.*" [Rights, more rights]. I remember in '86 – '87. While in '81, there was, "*Duam bukë*" [We want food], this I remember, except, "*Kosova Republikë,*" another slogan that I remember is, "*Duam bukë.*" Was it right or not, I won't talk about that right now because it is in the past. But those of '87 – '88 have more to do with saving the sovereignty, autonomy of Kosovo at that time, and they were connected to the political leaders of that time, saving the values, but I really don't remember all of them except the dominating one which was, "*Kemi të drejtë.*" [We are right] "*I duam të drejtat tona.*" [We want our rights]. And Kosovo Republic. I don't remember any slogan using the word democracy, maybe there were, but I don't remember them.

**Aurela Kadriu:** In the Blood Feuds Reconciliations movement, maybe we could stop and talk about it in a more detailed way, when did you join it, the way you joined it and if you remember any specific occasion of reconciliation which you were part of?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** I joined them through a maternal cousin who was a former policeman, since the new policemen were expelled from the Kosovo Police. He was an activist, in fact why the policemen who had been fired from the Kosovo Police were engaged is because they knew the people and the field, they were professionally, physically prepared in case protection was needed. And I went to the first meeting through him. I don't remember specific occasions, families, because there were a lot of families. I remember that I was a passive observer in the beginning, we weren't there to speak because there was no space, we were there just to support.

I remember a family, I don't remember the name right now, that forgave the blood of their son, but why I remember that occasion is because two-three murders had happened one after another for a very long time. It was a thirty-year-old conflict, it wasn't recent, that the one who forgave the blood had to forgive it for someone he had never met, this is a moment that I remember and that I was very impressed seeing people trying to go beyond themselves for someone they didn't even know. I mean, whether it was the grandfather, or their father's paternal uncle, or their father's brother, I don't remember, but it was someone they had never met before. The hardest moments were when after the refusals and everything, mothers took over to forgive the blood of their children.

That is a moment which at that time I didn't think about as going beyond yourself, but I told you that it was the idea that they were forgiving for something greater, so that there wouldn't be brother-killing among Albanians. But later when I started analyzing it, I have come to a situation where I am a mother



too, that is something irreplaceable. It was a moment through which maybe without being aware of it, we skipped whole stages of social development. With all the goodwill, with all the desire for them not to live under the pressure of fear, asking a mother or a father to forgive the blood of their child, was a very courageous thing to do. I don't believe I would do something like that now, I don't think I would insist as much as they did at that time, but maybe people found the strength to do something like that.

**Aurela Kadriu:** Can you tell us about what you were telling us before I interrupted you, about the '90s, about the parallel life?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** Eh, the parallel life is, as I told you, the school year '91-'92 didn't begin for us. The whole society was lost. We heard everyday how my classmates, my friends left Kosovo because of the massive military mobilization, and in order to survive the forced military mobilization, people started escaping, especially boys, massively. A kind of a double social death, physical and spiritual, because people started leaving, the city, respectively my neighborhood was empty, from the people that I knew, from my friends. The school year '91 didn't begin and we didn't know what was about to happen...

**Aurela Kadriu:** You still hadn't finished high school then?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** No, I had finished high school, I was registered as a student of the University of Pristina at that time.

**Aurela Kadriu:** At which faculty?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** At that time, I enrolled at the Faculty of Technics, the department of Energetic, Electro-Energetics. And I remember the preparations that were done in order to start that school year in the schools, in the parallel system, in private houses, I remember that we started the academic year in February-March, '92. And since high schools and the university were denied their buildings, the parallel system took place, elementary schools were still working. We organized that way, that elementary school students went to school in the first shift, while students of various faculties went in the second shift in some of the elementary schools of Pristina, of Vranjevc.

But this wasn't enough, the space wasn't enough and in a very short time, the house-schools were opened. A very special moment is when the professors of the University of Pristina opened the doors to their houses to give lectures to their students. This is something we don't talk much about, we don't mention much, but professors of the University of Pristina opened their doors first. People of goodwill opened their houses, no matter the difficulties they had, some of the houses were constructed, some weren't renovated, we started sitting in bricks upon which we put boards, I mean, boards and bricks were our seats.

I remember that lectures were held in various parts of the city, depending on where there was the opportunity for them to be held, and within one day we walked from Dragodan to Bregu i Diellit and to Xhemajl Ibishi Street, I mean, in three different locations within the city, going from a lecture to another was a kind of marathon. Then the police pressure, because there were more police forces in



the streets, the police were very active and wherever they saw two-three people, they stopped them, especially if they were young. I joke about my time now, I say that it is that time when I learned all the narrow streets of Pristina, because taking the main streets wasn't a very smart thing to do, and so we learned all the narrow streets of Pristina, not only us who were from Pristina but also those who were coming from other cities of Kosovo got to learn the streets of Pristina at that time. I mean we, the students of that time knew all the streets of Pristina, it was an interesting situation because we wouldn't learn them in a normal situation. And then they moved the students to periphery parts of the city, the dormitories weren't working for Albanian students. The university buildings were not open for Albanian students so the life of the Albanian student was taking place in the periphery.

They applied strict safety measures at that time, strict police repression measures. Add to this the extreme poverty that started growing, most of them had to quit their studies, I mean, they had to leave, to survive. And this is how the second generation of migrants from Kosovo starts. This is the greatest bend that ever happened and they had economic opportunities or other ways to go abroad.

Many friends of mine from high school who were very good students and became educated and successful people even in the places where they went, they had to quit their studies in order to save their heads. Those of us who remained, not all of us remained because of idealism, but because of the circumstances and conditions in which we lived. Best part of this is that we survived and continued our education even under those conditions. Even though today it might seem that...Considering that from a University you return to a faculty, to a room with boards where there are not even fundamental conditions to study, however, we have to be thankful for the effort of our teachers first.

In the social sense it cost us a lot, as a cultural totality, but thanks to the continuity of education even with the very difficult conditions, we are here today, because education was cut and we waited for an economic or political solution at that time, we would have many illiterate generations and the consequences would be much more harmful. But, no matter the difficult conditions, we wanted to prove that we can make it. Even though there is a lot of skepticism about it, looked at from this perspective, I think that the parallel education system created a continuity of survival. And no matter the harm we were done as a society, because all the enthusiasm of the young people to get educated, to become professionals was stuck in the lack of education opportunities. But now I think that it was the only smart solution of that time.

**Aurela Kadriu:** Can you tell us a little about students', I know that you were part of...

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** Students' protests...Students' protests, seems like my whole life loops around students and students' protests. Those protests didn't begin in '97, they began in '92-'93. I remember that I was also active in organizing them in '92-'93. There were just a few protests at that time, two or three of them where we demanded our return to school facilities, the right to the sovereignty of the university, the fundamental human right for education and so on, but I remember the police repression as well as the tortures we had from the police during those protests. And I remember there was not a social consensus, but a sudden silence of the protests in '93, I mean there was no attempt to organize any protest from '93 to '97 because the police repression was so heavy and on the other hand

there were wars in the region and on the other hand there was the military, physical inequality of the Albanian nation compared to the others.

And at some point we had enough of waiting for it to become better, because no matter the current opinions, we survived thanks to the courage to initiate the peaceful movement in Kosovo. Maybe people's desire was to start the war earlier, but we weren't ready for war or for resistance, armed resistance, not of that kind of resistance, that kind of format in which the countries around us were, or former Yugoslavia. The peaceful resistance had two good things, people's patience was tested, and we were taught how to survive in abnormal conditions.

And maybe seen from this perspective, maybe it was better if it happened earlier, I don't think that it would be better if it happened earlier or that it could happen earlier, if the war that happened in Kosovo in '98-'99, exploded in the same manner but in '93-'94, I think the consequences would be even worse, there would be a lot of damage, and I am sure one million people would no longer live. They wouldn't only go missing or migrate, but they wouldn't exist at all because the military capacities of former Yugoslavia were very big at that time for a country with a territory like Kosovo. Add to this the fact that they would be against a small unit, as Kosovo was at that time and the consequences would be very big. It is not that there weren't consequences from the last war in Kosovo, but I think that the mindset of the peaceful resistance helped, it had a positive effect and a positive effect on saving human lives in the first place.

Other things could pass with various calvary and sacrifice. In a way, the postpone of the agreement that was introduced from Sant'egidio for education, it's infinite prolonging, the lack of opportunity to reach an agreement for it to happen, that proposal pushed me to join the students' movement and the *Unioni i Pavarur i Studentëve* [Students' Independent Union], not the students' movement, but the *Unioni i Pavarur i Studentëve* in '96, now I was a student of the Faculty of Philosophy, because in the meantime I stopped the Faculty of Electronics with the goal to go to Zagreb, but then the war exploded there and I chose to return to Kosovo.

**Aurela Kadriu:** Can you tell us a little about this period, how did you interpret it when you went there as...

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** It is interesting, I applied in Zagreb in the academic year '90-'91, Department of Criminalistics. But since my diploma was issued by the Republic of Kosovo, my documents were not treated there but they were sent to Belgrade and I wasn't accepted, and only later I found out that my documents, my application, my request were in Belgrade, because they were transferred in an arbitrary way to Belgrade because they were documents from Kosovo.

My family was in very bad material, economic conditions at that time so through some friends, I was offered the opportunity to be a student with connections in Zagreb. And I accepted to go and see for one semester, and I remained there from September-October '93 to March '94. It was the peak of the war, everything started getting worse and since I had no chance to stay in Zagreb, returned to my family, and I was in a very bad mood because I really wanted to study and do good things, and in the end I remained home. I had no material conditions to return to the Faculty of Electronics, because it required books, exercises and everything, at my home there were already two students, because my

brother was a student now and my sister finished high school and was waiting to enroll at the faculty, so we had to set our priorities.

The economic situation of my family got worse and one day my mother put me in front of an ultimatum, because getting married was trendy at that time, "You will either go to university, or make a choice." And that is how I decided, I took my documents and went out. I saw some students going towards the Dubrovniku street and I went after them so I went to the Faculty of Philosophy, not because of a special choice, but I just wanted to see the opportunities. I went to the secretary of the faculty and asked them, "I am interested to enroll in your faculty, is there a chance?" We are talking about April '94.

I remember a person who was working there, his last name was Kastrati, a very good old man, he said, "Where were you earlier?" And I said smiling, "On the streets!" Without any complex. He said, "How can we accept you now?" I said, "But I have an index of the Faculty of Electronics," "Alright, you can come, but why don't you finish that one?" There were no more words, they made it possible for me to transfer from one faculty to the other, I mean, not from Zagreb, but from here. I went home and told my mother, "They accepted me in the faculty." And poor her, she didn't even believe that it would happen, but that was her ultimatum, either that or this, there is no grey. And my first time at the Faculty of Philosophy was...

**Aurela Kadriu:** In what department?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** In the Department of Pedagogy. My first lecture, I mean, the April term was about to begin in a few days and I went to the first lecture in Ethics class. And the professor, I don't remember his name right now...Mavriqi, Professor Mavriqi, he was the first professor that I met and the classroom was a room at a shop on a dead end street. There were 150-200 students of the first and second year preparing for the April term of exams. I entered, I remember I had very short hair, not all shaved, but very short hair, I was dressed in black, I wasn't as fat as I am now, I was much thinner. Professor Ramush Mavriqi started speaking about Immanuel Kant and this was the first lecture that I went to, nobody was speaking or asking any questions.

In the meantime, I raised my hand and asked a question and he said, "Who are you?" I told him who I was and he said, "Why are you here?" I said, "I am here to get to know who you are, to get to know about the book and take the exam in the April term." He said, "There is no way you will take it in the April term." And this is how it started, I really passed the exam in Ethics in the April term because I went home and read. And I remember the day of the exams, and because of the conditions, the professors would only put three-four students in the front, and would ask them the question, you know it, you don't know it, you know it, you don't know it, and this is how they passed, he asked three questions, those who knew them could pass and the others....And at some point he was tired and told me, "Come here." He put me in the front and we started talking for one hour and a half and he said, "You will come in the next term." He said, "Six!" Alright, six is fine, it didn't really matter to me. And we spoke for one hour and a half, he took my index and put the grade and I didn't discuss it. He said, "Come in the next term for a better grade." I didn't care about the grade.

And I took my index, I remember other students telling me that I had gotten them into trouble because they would fail too, it was very interesting. I took the index and went home, I didn't open it on the way to see the grade and I told my mother that I had passed the exam, "What grade did you get?" I said that I got a six and she took my index, opened it and said, "This is not a six, this is a nine." I said, "You must be mistaken," and that was when I got my first nine in the faculty. And this is how it started, I finished the exams of three years in less than one academic year and this is how I joined the *Unioni i Pavarur i Studentëve*. Back then, Dugolli, Bujar Dugolli was the leader of the *Unioni i Pavarur i Studentëve* within our faculty and this is how we met and I joined them. And when Bujar won the elections to be the leader of the *Unioni i Pavarur i Studentëve* that is when he also invited me to be his collaborator and that is how I joined them.

It was a bit problematic for me to join the idea of the peaceful movement because however, it was the time, we didn't know much about it. Myself, I didn't have much knowledge of Gandhism until we met, until we gathered as a group, until Albin Kurti came, that is when we started discussing and learning about Gandhism and the peaceful, pacifism, but the pacifism that we knew was the local one of the parallel system, the passive, peaceful resistance, but not the one of Gandhi or something like that. And that's how we started, I was a member of the leadership of *Unioni i Pavarur i Studentëve*, I was the only woman there at that time. And then other colleagues joined as well.

We began earlier with the preparations for the protest of October 1, 1997. There was desire, fear, anger and confusion about what was going to happen. October 1 is something that will always remain in my head, the waiting, fear, surviving, what was about to happen? Not to speak about October 1, but I would like to speak about another moment, not for the students, not for those of us who were part of the leadership, I wasn't part of the organizational council, but I was part of the leadership. I would like to talk about the readiness of all those people to support the students' movement, to be part of October 1, not October 1 as a date, but I consider it institution now, back then it was only a date, only a moment for me, but now it is an institution for me.

The readiness, willingness of people to be part of it, to be part of the crowd, of all those students. We chose to wear white shirts as symbols, it was not a moment of pride, but of the formation, of the mark, of the tattoo, not with colors but with emotions, things that swallow the moment. October 1 is a life in itself, it is not only a story in itself, it is not only a date, a day, but it is a life in itself. I remember more one day before October 1, that is a great moment for me. When you put your life in...When you play the film of your life backwards and think back on every moment because you know that tomorrow is a big day and you don't know whether your life will end or not...

### Part Three

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** For me, one day before October 1 is more important, when we were finished with everything and decided to go home in order to come the next day early in the morning, and one does a reflection of one's life. I was 24 at that time, and my life develops into a film of two-three hours in my head, I thought about what I had done, what had remained undone, what I would like to be different. Because we didn't know how tomorrow would end, whether we would return home or not or what

would happen. I would like to take the chance to thank over everyone, our mothers and fathers who found the strength to support their children and let them go to the protest that day.

Because I remember my mother, we were three students, four students. In fact, we dressed in white shirts and went out and she said, "See you!" nothing else. I mean, how she felt about it (laughs), "I will go to the protest, it is my obligation to go to the protest." But she was the one who remained home, and only later she told us, she said, "I really thought it was our last goodbye that day." But how did we not think about it, "I will go to the protest!"

The emotions before October 1 were maybe a lot bigger than during October because the moment when we started the protesting march, panic, fear, stress, confusion, all of them faded away, they became one and what happened, happened and we are here now. I think that the story of that day is a novel in itself, I don't have the strength or the desire to talk much about it because I fulfilled a part of my moral and social obligation, more of a moral obligation and I wanted to be myself in a way, I wanted to be loyal to the calls that I made.

I never thought about escaping the protest, but when there was torture, just like the others, I tried to survive. I mean, it is not, we didn't remain, there was no more place for us to keep the resistance the way we had planned. But you have to find yourself in every circumstance and moment. The calls, voices and screams of students while escaping through the hills to Velania have remained in my head, they weren't taking the streets anymore, but they were trying to climb the hills.

And the readiness of people to open their doors and shelter the students, considering that it can only take ten minutes for the police forces to come and destroy their houses. This is beyond every perception of social mobilization. If there was a similar situation today, I don't believe people and myself either, would open their doors so willingly. But the readiness of people and the trust that people had in the student movement, maybe not in an individual but in the movement, that is something I didn't get to face anywhere else, not during my work or my studies or during my life experience.

And after all those things, the absolute silence began, I was trying to find a phone to let my mother know that I am alive. And I know that for my mother and my father, it was the most difficult moment because my brother and my sister made it home and I didn't. They were waiting for people to let them know that I was stuck somewhere or...because there was a lot of information, and it was enough for them to know that I was fine, it didn't matter where I was, only that I was fine and alive. I mean, the fact itself that I was able to call meant that I wasn't in prison, I hadn't been arrested and that I am alive. I mean, those are moments that you are happy just to hear someone's voice.

This was the interesting moment, I was lucky enough to end up with a very good family who was sheltering a lot of students. I remember that the lady of the house gave me one of her shirts, a black shirt, so I could remove the white one. There was interesting symbolism. I spent that afternoon there and with that black shirt, I went down from Matiqan through the city, even though I didn't make it home that day, I slept at a friend of mine, at his family in fact.

But the white color was already part of the memory in my head, this is another moment. The development of the Students' peaceful movement, the shape it takes later, the activities, protests that take place later are a continuation but not less important. A lot of work was done for each of them, a lot of engagement was done to achieve our goal which was returning to the University of Pristina.

But every other protest was a different, new experience but without the fear of the first protest. I remember one of the protests where we raised the sheets, the books, a policeman beat me that day I have photographs of how he beat me and I was injured, an Italian photographer took the photo, his name was Carvalio, I don't remember his last name, Pier, Pier, I don't know, but it was in the newspaper...I have a photograph, and the policeman who beat me was relatively big, and relatively handsome, I mean, this is a very interesting detail of this.

And so, I definitely left the *Unioni i Pavarur i Studentëve* in November, '98. I mean at that time I found a job and became employed, because for me now it was a different situation, the economic situation in my family got really bad and I had to do something. But during the time I was engaged in the independent students' movement, I had the luck, I had the great luck to meet my friend from Women in Black, and professor Rino Belek, who made a big change for me in my life. Thanks to them, I got to know Women in Black, with the approach of active feminism.

And I've been a member and activist of the Women in Black Network, all around the world since '97. Unfortunately, they don't have an office here and we haven't tried to install or to organize in that way for certain circumstances, because of certain social, political, economic and moral circumstances. But I am part of Women in Black since that day, and I try to be an active part of the network as much as I can in a voluntary way.

**Aurela Kadriu:** You mentioned it earlier that '97 didn't go the way it was planned, can you tell us how was the resistance planned, how did you project it...

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** When I said that it didn't happen the way we had imagined it was during the preparations, we had decided to sit and stay there without moving if the police intervened. But it didn't happen that way, because the torture from the police and the civilians from the side was very harsh and they put pressure on the students, they pulled students from the ground.

In fact, only those of us who were in the first row managed to sit but others didn't because there were interventions from all sides. And, no matter the great safety provided by Albanian citizens who were trying to save the students, but the tear gas, the plastic bullets had their effect, the idea was for us to sit. Because our projection was that there wouldn't be such an intervention, maybe our desires and expectations were for such interventions not to happen. We thought that they would push us, but we didn't imagine an intervention like that one, so we didn't manage to achieve our plan which was for all of us to sit and be in silence for one minute, two-three, five minutes.

Not all the students, not all those who were part of the protest managed to sit. This didn't happen, but on the other hand, the protest was very well organized in every sense, there were groups, the ambulance cars, the citizens were very vigilant, they were very active and worked according to our plan, they opened their houses to offer water to the students. For example, nobody speaks about the

onions. It is interesting how it became part of the culture, whenever there was a protest, onions were part of the protester's arsenal.

But the water and the onions, the fact that people opened their doors to let some of the students in, for example some students escaped to the neighborhood of Dodona where there were families from the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians communities living. They opened their doors too, the protest was no longer only of Albanians, it was the protest of all the people who were living there. And I am telling you, all the goodwill and work that was done by the families, those inhabitants of Velania, that wasn't valued, their contribution was never valued. Because people really opened their doors, without any other interest. Considering that a big part of the citizens of Velania had better living standards than the rest of the city, this as far as...

**Aurela Kadriu:** What were the main slogans, the main calls of '97?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** Oh, there were many, there were many calls, maybe I should've taken the written ones. About rights, school in our language, in Albanian, I don't remember them right now. There were many slogans, there was a team of students of the Faculty of Civil Engineering and Architecture who wrote the slogans, "I want peace!" was one of them for example. I don't remember them right now even though I have the photographs at home, but right now I don't remember them. They mainly had to do with education, school, peace, human rights, for example. In another protest there was NATO [as a slogan, call], which is something that wasn't part of the protest of October 1.

**Aurela Kadriu:** '98, what happens with you in '98, you told me that you got employed...

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** Yes, I mean, I continued my activity within the *Unioni i Studentëve të Pavarur* until November, '98 when I started working for Swiss Caritas, a humanitarian organization of that time. Even before that time, I mean, in the early '98 I started voluntarily going to interpret for the journalists who were reporting from the field, I mean, foreign journalists who went to war zones.

I often joined them as a volunteer interpreter, there were also occasions when they paid me, but I was exclusively a volunteer interpreter in the field. I mean, I was a kind, one of the members of *Unioni i Pavarur i Studentëve* who went into the field with the journalists. Not only for the needs of the Union, but also to see the situation, to help, to send help during that time thanks to Women in Black. Time after time, I sent insulin to the field, Women in Black brought insulin through various journalists and I sent insulin wherever we went with the journalists, we gave it to people who were competent in health issues at that time.

This is how I continued, at the same time I was part of the *Unioni i Pavarur i Studentëve*. I mean, I was part of all the protests that were organized by the *Unioni i Studentëve të Pavarur*. Then I started working in the field with Swiss Caritas, we went all around Kosovo where there were war crises, where those who had moved were staying, it was a collaboration of all international organizations at that time and we were part of every action in the field.

I was in Pristina at my family's at the beginning of the bombings. I was in Kosovo all the time. We moved in the middle of the March until April 20 we moved to Gollak, I mean, in the village of Marec and



Mramor. I returned to Pristina on April 19, we returned the night between April 18 and April 19, we returned to Pristina and were here all the time.

My family tried many times, my brothers, parents, brothers and sisters attempted to go to Macedonia, but they weren't allowed because we weren't allowed to pass, to move, to leave our house. During that time there were police checkpoints, they checked my name and last name, I always told them that I was my sister because on one occasion one of my sisters wasn't home and I used her name to introduce myself. After April 20, we were forced, those of us who were in Pristina remained here and we were forced to keep a kind of green card which we couldn't move without, it was a kind of identification for the people who were inside the country.

This is a moment that is similar to the treatment that was done to people during the Holocaust because we had a special document that made us special, different from the others. And the green card, it wasn't yellow but green, I mean, it was written the way it was written, it showed the name and the last name, who you are, where you live, and we had to use it to get out of the neighborhood to get food, because the deposits were almost over.

You know, only the shops in Pristina had food which they sold at astronomical prices. At the first patrol of the police you had to show that card, otherwise you couldn't pass. But, regardless of the war, people went out, and I went out too, not every day, but I went from 11:00 to 12:00, to see, to meet, to try to find people in my family.

So, I was in Pristina for the first KFOR intervention, not when the first forces of the members of departments entered, but during the KFOR intervention. And June, June 11, 12 and 13 were the worst dates of that struggle, because nobody knew who was coming and who was going and what was happening. On one hand, you could see the military and police forces of Serbia leaving, on the other hand they spoke about the intervention of NATO forces. The first armed people of the NATO forces are the Burka unit, which remained in my mind like that...And the Russian units that entered Pristina at that time and started inspecting the convoy, started saving the convoy of Serbs who were leaving Pristina. This is in a few words until June, '99.

**Aurela Kadriu:** You mentioned it that you were an interpreter in the field. Can you tell us about the experience?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** The experience in the field was...(sighs). I wouldn't do the same thing today. I wouldn't do the same thing today. No matter the desire, will and theoretical background we had, the experience in the field was a very difficult one. I mainly helped foreign journalists with translation, but at the same time I got to see the situation in the field. The situation was very difficult, especially for those who had moved, who had been living in certain regions, for example Kishnarekë, where they lived in Kishnarekë, people gathered and lived in the plastic tents, misery.

Another occasion that I remember is the one in Pagarushë where a young woman gave birth to her child in the mountains. Due to the bad conditions of the mother, the KDOM mission which later

became the OSCE mission, after a long discussion, connections, conversations through the walkie-talkies, to decide whether to take the young lady with her child to the hospital or not (smiles). This was a very difficult moment that I remember and I believe no matter what happens...I never felt that way even in other places where I was where there was the first war crisis. I mean, a young woman who unfortunately got to give birth in a mountain, and her bad condition and the lack of opportunity to provide medical help for her.

I mean, I remember that some of the colleagues offered to stay so that the mission could take the woman and her child, but it was impossible and in the end she stayed...I still don't know where that woman has ended up, I haven't found the courage to ask or think much about her. Because, in the end, UNHCR took over to find a solution to that situation.

What I remember during my work with international organizations and journalists is the fear and desperation of people and the lack of chances for them to do something for themselves. We went, saw them and sent goods as much as we could, especially when we organized...Another moment that should maybe be mentioned and that is very important for our collective memory is the contribution of volunteers and activists of Mother Teresa Association. Because, the centers of Mother Teresa Associations, their branches and centers in villages were the reference point for all international organizations.

Another very difficult moment during my work in the field is the killing of Doctor Robaj. The place that I went to and the view in that place is terrible. Then another occasion is the visit in Reçak, two or three days after the Reçak massacre, the marks of the corpses in the places where they had been put. I mean, from where they were executed to where they were taken from their relatives at the mosque of the village.

That...and another moment is after Prekaz. After the war in Prekaz, after the killing of the Jashari family. I went there alter, three-four days later, I am not very sure now, but the smell of the gunpowder that you could feel all around the house and yard. That experience, that moment, it is very difficult to not think about that memory even a long time after it. This is it (smiles).

**Aurela Kadriu:** How did you continue after the war?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** I continued breathing again (smiles).

**Aurela Kadriu:** I mean, what happened with your personal life?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** After the war, after the war...Before the war, during the war, now this is a problem because...the physical war, the battle was over...the war wasn't over in '99 and is still not over. It is the continuity that follows you because the experience, emotions, pain, your wounds from that time will follow you for the longest time. But at that time I said, and I keep having that opinion that the war as such came to its end, the physical war, and I have to get ready to go to work tomorrow, because it was the only way to survive...

I continued working with the Swiss mission at that time. And the first days of work, not in June but in July '99, we went to the field to record the situation, collect data, meet people, meet their everyday needs and their concerns of existence, shelter. The greatest engagement of people, organization to awaken this nation...those were very fast developments. I mean, what I was impressed by is that people didn't always wait for others to help them, they started building their houses in their own powers. The help of diaspora is impressive!

We think that they have to, but people really left everything here, they invested, they invested in people's lives, they built their houses. I mean, they didn't wait for someone to build their houses, they created their own solutions. But on the other hand, the damage was very great, it is not only the physical and material damage, of the burned houses and all, but also the damage to the human being. I mean, no matter our willingness to work and do stuff, we haven't managed to work together in every respect.

For example, we worked for reconstruction, shelters and food...But we haven't managed to work with the rehabilitation of the trauma. On the other hand, another core moment and a social burden are those who are missing. Nobody accepts to speak or admit that those who are missing are killed, there is always the hope that they are somewhere and will return. This is another war consequence and a consequence of the lack of opportunity of our society to work in that direction. Work has been done, there have been attempts, but they weren't enough.

Then the treatment of various categories, be it women who remained without their husbands, single mothers who became war widows, the sexual rape victims, because there were sexual rape victims during the war, the consequences that follow...children who remained without their parents. There have been attempts to work a lot, but needs are very big and our opportunities were very small.

So, there is a need to work with women who were sexual rape victims at that time, and to build houses for them so that they have shelter and food. Many attempts to work in other respects have been done, but the needs were very big, while the opportunities were very little. The good part of all of this misfortune is that schools started right after the war (smiles). That was the most awakening moment for this society.

So the war is over, now we have to continue with our lives. The readiness of people to overcome their emotional and physical pain, to return to their lives made it possible for people to think that...Because the expectations were high, and people only thought about overcoming it and becoming better. And this enthusiasm only lasted for two-three years, until people started going back to the state of social desperation, which I was also part of.

So this is the post-war period, the expectation, curing, spiritual rehabilitation. The desire to change, to awaken. The social desperation, the desire to be independent. On the other hand, the lack of opportunity for many things to be provided in this country. These are the challenges which continue even 18 years after it.

**Aurela Kadriu:** What happened with you in the meantime? Until when did you work?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** In the meantime I started working for various organization. In 2000, yes, in 2001 I was on a study visit to South Africa, it had to do with interethnic and interreligious conflicts. Then I continued at the Humanistic Academy in Lillehammer, Norway, in the field of dialogue, dialogue and conflict management. For a long time, I worked in various programs for interethnic and interreligious conflicts. And like this (smiles), I am still here. This is the field in which I like working.

There were some moments in my life...I became a mother in 2007. I have a daughter who was born in 2007. During that time, I worked until that time, then I remained unemployed for some time, I remained unemployed after giving birth to my daughter. I only worked for one year in 2011 on conflict prevention, then I remained unemployed again. I had a son in 2012. And I am still unemployed since that time. This is what happened with me.

In the meantime, I have enrolled in my master's studies (smiles). Maybe a little late at this stage of life. Even though they aren't my first master's studies, but they are the first ones here, at the Department of Sociology. In the Department of Sociology within the Faculty of Philosophy.

**Aurela Kadriu:** What were the others, excuse me?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** (Laughs) From the academy in Lillehammer, I continued with various exams and trainings for interethnic and interreligious conflicts, as well as various training on conflict mediation, so a kind of work with continuous professional development. But there are not so many interethnic and interreligious conflicts here, so for now I am home, I am a housewife and a student, when I manage to (smiles). That is it in a few words.

**Aurela Kadriu:** So you have nothing to add? In fact, I have another short question which I think explains the context. In the very beginning of this interview you mentioned the game Partisans and Germans, what was it all about?

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** This game was a reflection of the movie *Boško Buha* (smiles).

**Aurela Kadriu:** How was the game played because...

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** A group of children acted like Germans and the other group like partisans. Germans always won (smiles). This is how it was, it was a game of the children of that time, one group stayed behind an improvised barrier, and we had the toys in gun shapes, they were either wood or plastic or...I mean, that was the game. One of the groups were partisans, the other were Germans. We switched sometimes, but Germans always won, because it was under the influence of the system. This game wasn't only played here, it was played all over former Yugoslavia. It was played in Albania as well, but not partisans and Germans, but partisans and the others.

It was a game played in socialist countries. I mean, a kind of entertainment but under the influence of the system. Because we were pioneers at that time, and everybody who went to the first grade, became a pioneer. It was the influence of the time, I mean, we are speaking of the '70s, the war was over in '45 and we still played partisans and Germans. I mean, we were fed the idea of being partisans

(laughs). Of course it was good to be a partisan because you would always win, but even when you got to be the German, a game is a game, it has its own rules. Partisans always won.

**Aurela Kadriu:** Okay, if you don't have anything to add, I would like to thank you very much for the interview.

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** That was it. I don't have anything to add except maybe to say that life experience is priceless. It is something else, but if I had the chance to go back from the beginning, I would do the same things all over again. Maybe not with the same people, maybe if I had the chance to change people, I would, but I think I would do the same things over again.

**Aurela Kadriu:** Thank you very much!

**Mihane Salihu-Bala:** Nothing (smiles).