

Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH FISNIK ISMAILI

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Duration: 252 minutes

Present:

1. Fisnik Ismaili(Speaker)
2. Kaltrina 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.

Part One

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What were your first memories?

Fisnik Ismaili: It's the building at the Tower Blocks in Pristina, at the water fountain. It's that environment, we are talking about the '70s, middle '70s, I was born in '73. It's the fountain, the Tower Blocks, the sixth floor, a broken stair before getting to the sixth floor, I think it still is broken. That neighborhood in Ulpiana. I remember some of the kids I used to be friends with, Faik, Anesa, when my sisters used to mock me, to tell you the truth, I don't remember much from my early childhood, and sometime in... So for three years, we lived in Moscow, and from there, I have more memories of life in Moscow and...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What did you do in Moscow?

Fisnik Ismaili: In Moscow... my father had been director of Jugobank's delegation, he had there a four-year mandate, of which we stayed there for three years. So after three years, they offered him another mandate, either go back after three years or stay for four more years, it was too much to stay for seven years, us as children didn't want to. My sisters are, the oldest one is six years older than me, the young one is four years older than me. They were in school, I was still in kindergarten, for them the experience was different, and three years were enough to, to experience it for them, and for me.

Actually, at that age I grew up, at that age, I started writing, reading, and my mother didn't work, so I spent a lot of time with her. I went to a part of kindergarten there. I don't have exact memories. I remember the kids I used to play with, a guy named Abdu, he was African-American, little. So since three-four years old, I've interacted with another race, which was more unusual for us, we were good friends, I don't know if he was from Somalia or from another Islamic state of Africa, because where we

lived there was like a quarter, we're talking about Russia in 1976, during Brezhnev's time, during the Cold War when Russia was extremely isolated, but there, in the quarter the internationals lived, more or less like, they are more separated here today. And part of these were different people who lived [worked] in embassies or consulates.

I don't remember anything about Abdu's family, but we were good friends, we would hang out in the neighborhood. And I remember there were two other Yugoslav families, some Bosnians and some from Belgrade. Ana and Marjana were two girls. These are the only memories, I remember that I liked Ana, Marjana liked me, we are talking about a period of time, those love triangles when you're four-five years old. I remember Moscow as a very big city, a city that was grim, but it also was great in some moments, with some objects that were before communism.

Not that I could make a distinction back then, but when I think about it today, I remember those bakeries, when there was no bread, the line would go up to fifty-sixty people waiting to eat, then you'd go to the Bolshoi Theater, it's still a theater, one of the most famous theaters in the world, and the greatness of the building, or Kremlin. There was a bigger joy when we went to the Domi Grushki as they used to call it, it means "toy house," there was a building where there were different toys, I liked going there, walking around, looking and buying toys.

I remember Russian cartoons, there was one with a wolf and a rabbit that run after one another all the time, I don't remember its name. I remember a small train that our mom had bought us, actually not small, it was as big as this table {points with his finger} we had a big table, they had put that train together there and other objects around it. Like this, I started collecting small cars, I still had a collection, quite a big one.

In Russia, the internationals were more privileged since we lived in quarters separated from other people, we are talking about that period of deep communism in Russia, there were shops like, how we call those Bondsteel shops, there were shops where only more privileged people could go and buy. They were like duty-free shops at the airport, there was everything there, there were chocolates there that you couldn't find in any other shop in Russia. There were jeans, back then people didn't have jeans. I remember they used to stop my father in the street and ask for his jeans, two-three times he came home with no jeans because he gave them to people. There you could buy these kinds of things, you know, Coca-Cola, Toblerone, these kinds of things that you couldn't find even in Yugoslavia at the time, actually a lot of these things came later.

I remember, I remember some of my parent's friends who were mostly students, my parents were more, more... I'm not saying old, but they were in their late thirties, early forties, but they were friends with some students who would come to Russia to study, mostly art students, music and acting. One of them was Faruk Begolli, I have some pictures with Faruk holding me when he was a young student, they used to come and hang out with us. So there was a small community of Albanians, mostly artists who studied there, if I'm not mistaken, Faruk was in a relationship with a pianist who...

Now Russia is enormous, and there are different races, I remember she had slightly more oriental eyes, but I didn't know where she was from, Uzbekistan, or... I don't know! But she was one of the most remarkable pianists at the time, but I don't know if in all of Russia, or only in Moscow, or in her school, but I know she used to teach me and I started playing the piano and for a time... if one of, I try to live a life with no regrets, but one of my regrets is that I stopped playing the piano when I shouldn't have, and I'm still sad I didn't continue with it, but this was more when we came back to Pristina as a result of... {takes a deep breath} how to I say, the disorganized school where I went to, and the music school.

But I'll talk later about coming back to Pristina. I'll tell you a little how, what kind of memories I have in Moscow and how I grew up. We were maybe you know, a little discomfort knowing the situation we are in now, and the situation we were back then, I was part of a more privileged family, from the fact that my father had the opportunity to work abroad to make more money. But this was a result of his work and my mom's, I suppose, who were very hardworking and zealous, they didn't stop you in Yugoslavia.

My mom and dad from the stories I know, that they told me, my father lived in a village near Ferizaj until he was around sixteen years old, Sazli, from there we realized that, as he used to say, "As I was hoeing," my father yelled, "Are you going to try harder or leave it." He said, "I just put the hoe down, and left the village."

He lived in Ferizaj for a little while until he started studying economics and came to Pristina. While my mother grew up in Mitrovica and came to study English in Pristina. They met here, they fell in love like a lot of couples, when you look at it, Pristina is built by people, its created by people... And I said in one of my [Facebook] statuses, "You are not born a *Prishtinali*,¹ you become one." Almost every capital city, the capital city attracts people. And my parents were a couple who decided to be together and continue their future here. My father never wanted to go back to the village. Actually I have few experiences from my father's village, compared to my mother's side of the family, even though my mom was born and raised in Mitrovica, actually, she was born in Pristina and raised in Mitrovica. I spend a part of my childhood there also.

I didn't really have any experiences in Ferizaj and Sazlinë, on my father's side. My father was more closed off in this sense, to meet the family... If someone did this, it was my mother, she brought us to the family members of both parties. And they started in the 60s, my two sisters were born. They started living in the Tower Blocks, before this, I don't know where they lived, I never asked them. That's where I was born, so we spent three years, in '76, we lived in Moscow for three years, '79.

I told you about Moscow more or less... That's where I was taught to write, read. My mother had time to spend with me.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Did you learn Russian?

¹ People who come from Pristina.

Fisnik Ismaili: I did, I spoke Russian, Serbian, Albanian, speak and write Cyrillic, Latin. My mother had time to spend with me. I also went to... I started going to kindergarten, and at that time, I engaged in different activities, I drew, tried to play piano, they identified me as quite talented, and sometime in '79, we came back. I remember, a very interesting memory, in '80, there would be a, the Olympics in Moscow, and they had a bear as a mascot, and they had made different materials with that bear skiing, falling... it was, I don't remember if it was, no, no... I think it was the Summer Olympics, not Winter. But the bear doing different sports. I just know they had a bear and they made *značka*,² marks, pens. They manufactured all kinds of things... millions of things!

And I remember that bear was an identification mark which they started promoting years earlier for the Olympics, but we didn't get to see that since we came to Pristina. So in '73, when I started school... I started in '79, when we came back in September 1979.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Where did you go back?

Fisnik Ismaili: We came back to the Tower Blocks. And...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Had anything changed?

Fisnik Ismaili: I don't remember much there because, after we came back, we moved. The Tower Block, it was the first, at the water fountain, the first one. I don't remember much from my kindergarten, maybe when school started and we moved from there to Dardania, I remember many things from Ulipana because many of my friends lived there.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Then in '79, you came back?

Fisnik Ismaili: In '79, we came back. I remember from what my mom used to tell me because I was six years old, they didn't want to accept me in school because I was young. On the other side, I was tall and Faik Ispahiu was a good friend of mine, Faik is at BIRN, you probably know him. He was a year older than me. Anesa, Dua Lipa's mother, was my neighbor and my best friend in the first grade, and... I even used to have a crush on her! We used to sit at the same table at school,

Now I remember, she went... My mom had asked my teacher to take me because we had four years in between my sister and she wanted me to go to the same teacher, and after a few pushes, they accepted. When I went to school, I was taller than all other kids.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Where did you go to school?

Fisnik Ismaili: At Hasan Prishtina. I was a head taller than the other. I could write, read, I had learned everything. I became a problem for the teacher, I annoyed her.

² Srb. *Značka*, emblem.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Who was your teacher?

Fisnik Ismaili: Hylkije Qirezi. Hylkija was older, but she was one of the best teachers at Hasan Prishtina. I have very good memories of her. We loved her very much, and the fact that my sister before me had stories and love for her, which I had inherited from her, but I also annoyed her because you know, in the beginning, we were learning the letters, I would raise my hand and... at some point she told my mom, "Put him in second grade for God's sake!" But now the friendships I had created in the middle of Faik and Anesa and other friends in the first grade... I didn't want to, maybe my whole life would have been different if I had gone to the second grade back then, but I didn't want to, even though Faik asked me to, because we were really good friends. We both were a little fat, which has followed us into old age, and then we both lost weight at the same time.

It wasn't long, in the neighborhood where most of my classmates lived, it wasn't long and we moved to Dardania, I don't remember the year exactly, '81-82.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Which part of Dardania?

Fisnik Ismaili: The one that is now called Adelina's Apartments. Behind that is the kindergarten, behind the kindergarten, there are some small apartments, three-four stories, they're very cute, then there a field in front and the orange school there. So those small apartments, they were phenomenal. Actually, my father, when we stayed in Russia, then he had income, and with it he started building a house in Dragodan, which I don't remember. He took me a few trips to look at it when we would come from Russia.

I don't remember the place at all, if you go to Dragodan today, I would not be able to find it. I just remember it was being built and I couldn't imagine what is it like to live in a house. I was a kid of apartments. But when we got that apartment in Dardania, the state gave it to my father. Because when my dad came back, he became director of the Shock Absorber Factory in Prishtina, and he was leading a factory which had problems, he was trying to make it better. And, at that time, to have a state apartment and a house, they would look at you weirdly, it meant you were misusing official duties. Compared to how they steal and misuse their official positions back then, it was a joke, but it was a big deal back then, that's why my father sold the house. So he didn't want to keep the house, he didn't want anyone... to give anyone reason to talk about any misuse that could happen, even though you can't stop people. I'm talking from my own experience, as good and honest as you try to be, people will always find something wrong.

But my dad tried to maintain a life, even though we were more privileged, even though we never had financial problems. Until he bought me a toy or something, all my friends would have it, I would have it last, even if they would come from a family that didn't have as much income as we did. I remember my first computer, I begged him for two years until he bought it for me. All my friends had computers, he wouldn't buy me one. I have many memories in Dardania, many more because that's where I started growing up...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: You lived in this part of Dardania that was built later, right?

Fisnik Ismaili: Yes, yes. So from my balcony, from my room's window, balcony, you could see where now the school is. It was all meadow back then, only the solidarity apartments were built as a base, near there. It was all meadow, the road, Emshir was all meadow. Maybe a sporadic house here and there. I don't remember if the bus station was already built, or being built, you could see it, in skyline, you could see it from my window. And down there where the school is today, meadow, cows would graze there. We would go out and bother the guy who would look after the cows, he would run after us with a stick. Things like this...

A... They talked a lot about a... because where we lived, that apartment was, it had three entrances, six apartments each, where the directors of different organizations were. There was the director of KEK³, the director of Fazita, it was the wallpaper factory, it was, I don't remember... people who were functionaries. They used to call it, "The apartment of functionaries", and in front of it there were the solidarity apartments, which were around five times bigger, with five times more people which mostly were people who were poor. And there was a grudge against us, the children who played there, because we were more privileged, and I spent a considerable amount of my life in Dardania getting beaten up by the kids from the apartments of solidarity, running after us to beat us up. Until later when we started getting along, when the relations with Serbs started getting bad, then we had to hang out together.

But I know that they often stopped me, took my money, beat me up. They harmed us. Or we would throw rocks at each other for about two hours. In the meantime, I started seeing Pristina getting built, that growth. I know that the Tower Blocks, even though I don't remember much, but at the Tower Blocks, over the dormitories, Bregu i Diellit, there was a meadow in the 60s, beginning of the 70s, but I didn't hang around there. I went around Dardania. I don't remember the years, the heating company was always there. The heating company had a yard, where Termokiss is now, there was a yard all with thorns. During the summer, the thorns would get very high, we would go in and cut them, turn them into tunnels, and inside we would open like rooms, we stayed there inside, make, imagine things, play with planks, with... We didn't have games then, computers came later.

I know that there I met my best friends of my life with whom unfortunately I lost contact, but we grew up there, who were pretty much the same. Now there was a class difference, that necessarily forced you to make friends, you couldn't, sometimes we wouldn't have things in common with classmates. Whoever was from the middle class, we would hang out more, whoever was from a lower class, we wouldn't, for example, you had, we had a boy, he was from Lagjia e Spitalit, he was quite a bandit, we wouldn't hang out with him, or even go to his neighborhood because you'd get beaten up.

So you couldn't even be his friend because he would also get beaten up because he is hanging out with you, they would harm him in his neighborhood. At that time, the neighborhoods I would hang

³ Kosovo Energy Corporation.

around were Ulpiana, since my school was there, and Dardania, since there's where I grew up, so I didn't get to go around and see. I know that I started going to music school, my mother was working at the National Library and I experienced that transition... Where the Gallery [of Arts] is today, there was the old library. I don't remember the year, but in the beginning of the '80s, the building with the domes was built, and they moved, they moved to the new facility. I was young, I would hang out there too.

My father was working at the Shock Absorber Factory, that today is Klan [Kosova], in the outskirts of Pristina. The work went well for him, he achieved an agreement with Peugeot, to sell them shock absorbers that were manufactured here, and they made a connection with Peugeot, they started bringing, they brought Peugeots in Kosovo and sold them for a cheaper price. It was a success which he considered a major success. And I didn't hang out much in other parts of Pristina. I mostly remember the music school Elena Gjika there. I used to go to Teacher Pasionare, who was quite tough, you know, she was a good teacher, but very tough. And piano was going well for me.

My mother was more modern, she used to drive at that time. So they had a car, we had in the 60s, 70s, we had a Volkswagen, bug, turtle. After that, in Russia, they bought a Lada, an orange Lada, we brought here too, I remember it in the streets... This is interesting what I remember more from Russia, I'll go back, maybe this is how, I have to jump...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: No, no. No problem.

Fisnik Ismaili: My mother used to drive back then, we are talking about the 70s, she actually was part of some rallies, some races, that, it was unusual for Albanian women at the time. And we remember, those boulevards in Moscow are quite big, and they had a few strips, lanes, but one was reserved for diplomatic cars or official cars, so no one could go into that lane, it was just for official cars, practically it was for Brezhnev when he would pass. And I remember we had some black license plates to show that we are foreigners, so we were privileged, but even we couldn't get into that lane, and every time we would see the green lights, we would start, "Go, go, go, go!" Pressuring my mother, she would follow green lights, and we often would go into that lane, and if the police would stop her, she would pretend to know Russian and say, "Look at my license plates, I thought it was for us." This is how she would always get out of it.

So my mother was more resourceful, more crafty, you know, more organized. My father was quite strict, he went to work, came back. He had a schedule, he would come at 15:00, immediately, he would sleep from 17:00-18:00, he would get up, eat something, watch the news. He had a schedule, like that. Then he would go out if he had to.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Which one of your parents were you closer to?

Fisnik Ismaili: With my mother. I didn't spend much time with my father. My mother, I'm saying, from Russia, she would spend time with us every day, she was always devoted to us. She tried to be a friend to us, and she was a friend, but sometimes she would take it too far because we wanted to throw a

party, to gather out friends, she would organize them, “Leave us, you know, leave us...” Then she wanted to stay there, like pepper, she would know when it’s enough and she would leave us.

But the reason why I left the music school was because my mom would come, I would be stuck, young, I would be stuck at Elena Gjika, at, because I don’t remember what the name of the school used to be...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: It was named Vuk Karadžić.

Fisnik Ismaili: Vuk Karadžić, yes. In front of Vuk Karadžić, there was the music school. I remember once my mom had forgotten to take, when it was over, and take me to school. Because she used to come there and take me to Hasan Prishtina, and I was stuck, I didn’t know where to go, how to get oriented, a little after we came back from Russia, and I stayed there crying until she remembered (smiles) to come and get me after two hours, she found me there and I said, “I won’t go to music school anymore.” And I didn’t. I quit piano, I regret it, I regret it a lot. Everytime I hear the piano, my eyes fill with tears, but whatever happened, happened.

Part Two

Fisnik Ismajli: And nothing, we had a piano at home, my sister started playing, but she was kind of quiet, too. We had a big apartment in Dardania, we each had our own room, back then, it was quite the privilege. My room was facing the bus station, and later the school was built. The street was there, we used to play football there, and later basketball. We used to hang out there, now that I’m thinking about it, I spent a part of elementary school there, mostly partly in Dardania, and partly in Ulpiana, it’s not like I went to other parts.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: So they were being built?

Fisnik Ismajli: Absolutely. And sometimes I would go up to Lakrishtë because Luli, my best friend from class, and it’s interesting how I created friendships, I always had the best friendships with the shortest people in the class, in elementary school and in high school. And always with Luli, he lived in Lakrishtë, and I used to accompany him to Lakrishtë. His mother was a teacher of the same generation at Hasan Prishtina, so I used to hang out more with him because we used to take the same road home. In the meantime, the school in Dardania started getting built, I remember we would get down to steal planks, to run away from *strazhari*,⁴ we used to steal planks to build rifles to shoot at each other with... I wrote a [Facebook] status, that was our Counter-Strike back then. Playing Cowboys and Indians, or Partizans and Germans, we had these two games. We grew up with movies about Germans, Partizans and cowboys. I read a lot of comics, a lot of comics, and actually I mostly learned Serbian from comics. *Zagori*, *Blek Stena*, *Commandant Mark*, *Captain Mik* was my favorite.

⁴ Serb.: *Straža*, guard, in this case, *strazhari* means guard.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Where did you buy them?

Fisnik Ismajli: They sold them in kiosks, but luckily Luan was my neighbor, who later became my sister's husband, who had a great collection of comics, over two thousand comics. And there is no publishing... we, I thought about it, because in 2003, I came back to Kosovo to make comics, I remember around 24 [kinds] of comics in Serbian and Croatia in Yugoslavia that I read, that at least a copy of one comic, I had a few series that I read completely. There are no, rare are the comics that were published in Yugoslavia that I did not read. Also *Zabavnik* was *Politikin Zabavnik*, I still consider it one of the most entertaining magazines and most educational in the region.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Was this something that was done by most of your generation?

Fisnik Ismajli: Ah, not exactly. I found out about *Zabavnik*, I'll tell you now about the part of my life that I spent in Mitrovica. Because preliminarily the school, I don't remember the period maybe before starting school, maybe that's why I don't remember the Tower Block because in that part, I can't remember. My parents worked, my sisters were at school, I was home alone. I spent a part of my childhood at my grandmother's in Mitrovica, so they took me there on Monday, and picked me up on Friday, so I would stay in Mitrovica for a week, or often during summer and winter holidays I would stay at my grandmother's.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Where did your grandmother live in Mitrovica?

Fisnik Ismajli: She lived at the Blue Tower Block in front of the Jugobanka, immediately in front of the sports hall and Ibri's bridge, from the window you could see the Ibri bridge, sports hall, exactly in the center. I remember two, I remember the sweet shop Ballkani, it is still there, near it was Egipati, Egjipti [Albanian], Egipat in Serbian. At Egipat, I used to like cream puffs more than at Ballkani, I remember that about Egipat, once when I was in my twenties in England, I had a dream that they sold it to the Chinese and they had turned into a Chinese restaurant, I felt sorry for them. It's amazing that Ballkan preserved all they did, and also Elida, that tried to keep some sort of tradition.

While I don't know what happened to Egipat, why they sold it, but I spent a considerable amount of my childhood there. Pilara was a store where my grandfather used to take me, it had a very peculiar smell and usually *Voçara*⁵ stores had that peculiar smell, you could identify it from the smell, the smell of the store, I can't explain it, the combination of the products with the fruits, I can't explain it, but it takes me back to that time, he used to buy me some *Kraš*⁶ chocolates, who were Braca and Seka, that were sister and brother, in red and blue.

And another sweet memory from Mitrovica is that to go from the Blue Tower Block you have to pass by the *korzo*⁷ to get to the [Hotel] Lux, that is the shopping mall at Jadrani where KFC is today. Jadrani had a popular bakery in Mitrovica, and every morning I'd to go buy *pitalka*⁸ and I liked eating boiled eggs with hot *pitalka* and butter, a little salt and boiled eggs, like a sandwich. I still drool when I think

⁵ Srb.: *Voçara*, fruit and vegetable shop.

⁶ Cro.: *Kraš*, brand of Croatian chocolates.

⁷ Main street, reserved for pedestrians.

⁸ Pita bread

about it. My grandmother knew, because if you let me, I'll only eat eggs, three times a day and I never have a problem. My grandmother knew, and they sent me to buy *pitalka* often, and the trip until you went there, you would get the hot *pitalka* and until you get back, you would eat half of it little by little through the center of Mitrovica.

In Mitrovica, my grandfather had a collection of *Zabavnik*, we are talking about big piles on the balcony {shows with his hands}, where I would not go to Mitrovica for a semester, when I went, magazines of 10-15 weeks were waiting for me, depending on how many weeks pass, because it would get published on Fridays, plus there were also past issues. Plus here were also past issues. That's where I continued developing Serbian language, but whether you wanted or not, you would learn Cyrillic in *Zabavnik* and reading comics, that's how I kept learning. I forgot the Russian language in elementary school because my teacher would make me recite in elementary school, because we have a student who speaks Russian here, then the whole school would say to me, "Look at the rotten Russian!" Then the whole school would make fun of me and bully me until I started refusing to speak Russian, today, I can't speak it.

This is one of the other regrets, except piano, I think as many languages as you know, that much you're worth. To forget a language you could speak makes you feel mad. When I think about it today, at the time, I thought it was more logical because Russians were considered undeveloped, and then when I went to live in England, I realized how superior we thought we were, and we still do, us Albanians as a society, we think the whole universe revolves around us, and how racist, and how xenophobic we used to be, and a big part still are. But, back then, it seemed normal to curse Russians, make fun of Bulgarians, who really were another class in comparison with us, but the way we looked at them.

And when I think about it, we were quite stubborn people, but even today, there are people like that, but back then it was more acceptable. So even today, when they do things like that, you say, "Wait, you have many more people who say, 'Wait, don't say that about X nationality.'" Back then, we were the best, and there was no one better than us. Apparently, it was the influence of the Yugoslav propaganda in general {drinks}. Where everybody would brag about themselves, surely other countries also had propaganda in the media, put themselves higher.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: When did you start going to high school, in which year?

Fisnik Ismaili: I started high school, I finished it in '91, so it means in '87, '86-'87, Ivo Lllolla Ribar, Sami Frashëri. And now Prishtina started getting bigger for me. Otherwise, when Dardania opened, I was on of the... because there were only two or three years left, I don't remember, because a lot of my friends who lived in Ulpiana were scattered in different neighborhoods. My best friend, Valoni, went to live in Bregu i Diellit. And when it opened, almost at the same time, Ismajl Qemajli was also opened, how was it called back then, Josip Broz Tito and Dardania were opened almost at the same time. He went from Hasan Prishtina to Josip Broz, I didn't go to Dardania...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What was Dardania called?

Fisnik Ismaili: Dardania was called Dardania, no, Vladimir Ilić Lenin, you reminded me... it was the orange school, I used to say, we used to make fun of it, "If you can't wake up, just open the curtains..." Because honestly the first thing you saw when you opened the curtains was the school, "You open the curtains and your eyes will open." And when the sun would hit in the morning, it would blind you...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Did you go to school there?

Fisnik Ismaili: No. Not me, but there were many who moved from Upliana to Dardania that went there. I didn't, because there only two-three years left, I didn't want to ruin my friendships. I thought if I didn't go to second grade, you know, get out of the class, I'm not doing it now. And actually, I don't remember, all classmates stayed, none of us went to Vladimir Ilić Lenin.

Coincidentally, while I was in Russia, one of the memories I had, we went to the Kremlin, in the mausoleum, and I saw Lenin's embalmed body. And now, when I think about it, how old was I, five years old to go see a dead person... The way it was treated was very... now that I think about it, I used to think it's normal, he looked like he was sleeping. But now when I think about it, to preserve a person for people to go around him, to put him that high... [shrugs shoulders] seems not normal. I don't know if it still there, if they still keep or they removed it? [addressed the interviewer] I just remember that you used to look at a dead embalmed body, from up, he was down, and you would go around it.

And in Dardania, Dardania was being built, in the meantime when I started...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: When you say Dardania was being built, did the solidarity apartments exist?

Fisnik Ismaili: Yes, the school started...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What about Kurrizi?

Fisnik Ismaili: Kurrizi later, but even the white ones [apartments] that are behind the school, that part... I remember I once sank in mud, I lost one of my shoes that I had just bought. It was nighttime, we went running to annoy the *strazhar* something, I just bought my new Adidas shoes, half shoes-sneakers. And my foot sinks in, and when I took it off, without it. And the guard started coming after us, and he sees me crying, "What happened, what happened?" "Oh, my shoe, my life." My friends still make fun of me, "My shoe, my life."

And he started looking for my shoe with a flashlight, he didn't beat us up, but he was looking for my shoe. And I didn't find it. I sneaked into the house, barefoot, I had just bought the shoes. I got in barefoot and I didn't sleep all night long, to wake up early in the morning and look for my shoe, and I found it. You only see the top of the shoe, but I found it. I didn't tell my mother. It took me three hours to wash the mud off.

Things like this, we used to make these kind of mischief, but not anything, not anything serious. They more intellectual games. We used to watch *Galactica*, it was popular. I like science fiction, from comics

and TV programs back then, especially *Star Trek*, Bosnia used to play it, if I'm not mistaken Bosnians used to play the best sitcoms, Zagreb. And I could speak the language.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Did you go to the cinema?

Fisnik Ismaili: At the cinema, yes. Yes, I watched all Bruce Lee's movies, which then you would re-watch....

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Which cinema?

Fisnik Ismaili: What?

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Which cinema did you go to?

Fisnik Ismaili: It depended where the movie would be shown, so, Rinia 1, 2, Vllaznimi that now is ABC, and JNA, Armata, Kino Armata, we did not miss one, depending on the movie. At JNA, if I'm not mistaken...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What do you remember?

Fisnik Ismaili: I mostly remember movies with Bruce Lee, those were our favorites. I remember once, when we grew up, we went to watch porn.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Where was this?

Fisnik Ismaili: At Kino Rini, there was, yes. At Kino Rinia 1, 2 was where De Rada is now. We even went to watch porn. They used to bring love movies, usually Kino Armata, so JNA used to bring some weird movies, while Kino Armata and Vllaznimi had more mainstream movies. I remember, I don't remember the year, *Platoon* was released, *Top Gun*, obviously whichever movie you saw, you wanted to have the profession of the main character. *Platoon* with Willem Defoe was one of the movies, Tom Berenger was one of the movies Vietnam-themed, I left the cinema crying, after every Bruce Lee movie, we left fighting. Actually, I remember once one of my friends left fighting *ua-ua* {onomatopoeia} falling down, "Aaa my hand, my hand," We said, "Come on, it's fine." You know when you set the hand back in place for someone {shows with his hands} "Come on, come on" He was like, "*Ua-haa*" {onomatopoeia}. We went home, "Oh *bre*⁹, this hand *ua-ua*." When, the next day, he didn't come to school, what happened, he had broken his hand (laughs). He broke his hand, he didn't even know it. And we were trying to fix it (laughs).

I watched a lot of movies. I read a lot of comics. I said, Luan had about 700-800 comics, maybe more. Then he gave them to me, we had a garage, I kept them there. And when my mother bought parquet, she wanted to leave it in the garage, there was no space so she threw away my comics without asking me. I didn't talk to her for about six months. I, I can't explain the love I had for comics. I didn't talk to her for six months, I still mention the parquet to her, if had those comics today, they're... a treasure... she just took them and *qkllup* {onomatopoeia} and threw them in the trash. "You already read them

⁹ Colloquial: used to emphasize the sentence, it expresses strong emotion. More adds emphasis, like *bre*, similar to the English *bro*, brother.

all.” “I know I read them, but I would have read them four times.” I remember, the songs I hear today, songs by Depeche Mode and some other songs my sisters used to listen to, a cassette tape, we used to record our favorite songs. I hear the songs and I remember the times I read comics while listening to those songs. I get goosebumps, and I remember that part.

So, comics, movies, television shows, so *Only Fools and Horses*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. I know them all by name, last name, characters, stories, ‘Allo ‘Allo!, what else did we watch...? More or less... there are some other, I don’t remember right now. ‘Allo ‘Allo! and *Only Fools and Horses*, *Mučke* was called in Croatia, I did not stop watching those until I went to England. When I went to live in England, I went to Peckham, just to see the neighborhood they described in the show. That was their influence on us.

Now when I started high school, that’s when I started going around Pristina more, because I usually walked, I took [the bus] 4 rarely, 4 forever passed that way and went to Gërmia. Rarely by bus, I walked more often from Dardania to Ivo Lolla, now called Sami Frashëri. And back then, I explain it in a [Facebook] status, how I passed by *Lepa Brena*, now KEK, see it getting built, see the Post Office getting built, because I passed that way. Go by Radio Kosova, which is older, where Radio Kosova is today, it used to be RTP.¹⁰ I used to go to the National Library, get some money from my mom, I went by Hotel Grand, Korzo, then the road was open, go to Gërmia shopping mall, which is being talked about, I never had an emotional connection with it.

Where the Government is, there used to be the Central Bank, my father moved from the Shock Absorbers Factory and became Governor of the Central Bank of Kosovo, and would stop...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Where Bankkos is, right?

Fisnik Ismaili: No, Bankkos was where LC Waikiki is today.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Wasn’t the Central Bank where it is today?

Fisnik Ismaili: Ja a.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What was there?

Fisnik Ismaili: I think a syndicate was there. Or something like that {drinks}. CBK there at NEWBORN, right? I think it was a syndicate or something, but it wasn’t a bank. The Central Bank of Kosovo was where the government building is today. My father’s office was on the third floor. That’s the Prime Minister’s office today, if I’m not mistaken. And while I was walking there, I would stop...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: That part was open? The Central Bank, The Post Office...

Fisnik Ismaili: The Post Office, the Assembly, the Municipality...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Can you describe it? You probably went to school like that...

¹⁰ Pristina Radio Television, abbreviated as RTP or TVP, was Kosovo's first Albanian radio station.

Fisnik Ismaili: Then I went to...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Because that part hasn't been opened in 20 years.

Fisnik Ismaili: It seems normal to me, because now, when I go to the Assembly, I have to pass by there...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Yes, you, but that part is not accessible to us.

Fisnik Ismaili: You are right, now you're making me think. It was flat, there was no road I think.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: I think it was a plateau.

Fisnik Ismaili: Like a plateau, if I'm not wrong, yes, I think it was a plateau.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What was there, the Statistical Office no, but...

Fisnik Ismaili: Something with accountants...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Social Services maybe?

Fisnik Ismaili: Also the Association of Accountants was there.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Yes, in front of the Executive Council, how is it now, the Parliament.

Fisnik Ismaili: Yes, and... but I used to go more...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: How was it there because that also changed a lot? So from the Hotel Union to...

Fisnik Ismaili: It's interesting I never noticed Hotel Union, as much as I did Hotel Božur for example. Union was always a building that you never figured out what was in there, I was never curious to go in. It had an aura that pushed you away, "Don't come near!" I don't know why, I don't know why! I would like to know if anyone else felt the same same. Was it a hotel? {addresses the interviewer}

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Yes, most of the time.

Fisnik Ismaili: My father used to take me to Božur, or Grand to drink something, but never Union.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: How was it inside of Božur? Because it has changed.

Fisnik Ismaili: Božur had a restaurant *zhmn* {onomatopoeia}, a restaurant like a wedding hall on the ground floor, and it was, it was a Yugoslavia time hotel, you know, there was a lot of the same model, a reception, the restaurant, terrace and a restaurant where people would hang out during the day, drink raki,¹¹ Grand also had... Grand was more exclusive, they tried to fix it with some battens. But the buffet downstairs, the coffee as a coffee had some sort of... even the smell was the same as, as Narcisi in Brezovica, like another hotel in Kopaonik that we went, and some other Yugoslavian hotels. Even the same smell, Molika had even the same wood, like having built it from the same model. It wasn't

¹¹ *Raki* is a very common alcoholic drink made from distillation of fermented fruit.

imposing, so my father saw more friends there than at Union. I don't even remember one single time I went inside Union. It had a, I don't know, it had an aura that pushed you away, like saying, "Don't come near!" Or maybe it scared me because it was older, or... I don't know.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: How was it there?

Fisnik Ismaili: I don't remember much, maybe now that I've passed by there so many times, and seeing that emptiness, I've started thinking it was always like that, even though I'm trying to go back to the time after the war when there were two-story buildings, actually there was a store which had the door on the second floor, there was the door downstairs, and the door on the second floor, if you opened it, you would fall on to the street (laughs). I even have a picture of it somewhere. But it was like that, but there were many like that in that part, bridal gowns, wedding dresses, and jewelers. Like that, that's the kind of memory I have of that. And that's where the old park of the city started. It started earlier, not that late. Now it had faded away.

I remember the water fountain where I used to drink water at the mosque, and then there was nothing impressive, some *burektore*¹² that you would stop and eat, up to Sami Frashëri, Ivo Lolla.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Was there any popular *burektore*, or what?

Fisnik Ismaili: There was a *burektore* in front, now I think it still is a sweet shop, or I don't know what. In front of the Clock Tower, a little on the left, not where Sulltan is, but a little more left. During the school break, that is where we used to eat *burek*¹³. I don't know if there were any *qebaptore*¹⁴.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Why did you decide to go to gymnasium?

Fisnik Ismaili: Why? Why did I decide, or why did I decide that gymnasium in particular? Or gymnasium in general?

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Yes, why at the gymnasium?

Fisnik Ismaili: No, at that time, you could not decide not to go to school if both your parents had university degrees. That was the pressure of society that the kid... the cases were both parents had degrees so... It was unacceptable if the kid didn't go to school. There were higher expectations. I actually, I had the most pressure from my father, his expectations of me. And...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What expectations did he have?

Fisnik Ismaili: And I think that influenced... look at my sisters, none of my sisters finished university, they got pregnant, got married young, in a way, my father was disappointed. And then I had to carry that burden, their failures. For him, it was unimaginable to have both parents with degrees, and not us. And maybe, I think, we talked about it because my father died two and a half years ago, when I talked to my sisters, we said that exactly the way he pressured us as children influenced them give up,

¹² A bakery where they sell *burek*.

¹³ Baked pastries filled with meat, spinach or cheese.

¹⁴ A place where they sell kebabs.

say, “You know what...” It had another effect on me. It pushed me then to rebel against him, I tried to do something to prove to him that I can do it, but not how he wanted me to do it, that’s what drove me. He wanted me to become a financier. I liked something different. But to convince him that I can also do something else the best. Because he also had high standards. We had conflicts all the time, because not... I would rebel against him in the sense that I didn’t wanna do what he wanted. For me it was, “You want me to finish university, yes, but I will study what I want.”

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What did you want to do?

Fisnik Ismaili: I, I used to draw really well and my [materna] uncle is a painter. I grew up in an environment with art lovers, a part of my family are architects and that affected me, but even earlier they identified the drawing skills I had. Today, I can’t draw. And, yes, my uncle is the biggest drawing critic. He tells you it is not good up the point that you would be ashamed to tell him what you drew. And first when I told my father I want to study graphic design, I barely said it because I was very scared. But this was later, I would go back more... And he was so enthusiastic about it. So in my notebooks there were always cowboys, sneakers drawn, I liked designing sneakers. There was a period of time... in different periods of time I used to draw different things. A part, at some point I was obsessed with cowboys, at some point I was obsessed with Spider-Man, then sneakers. I remember that I drew, I designed sneakers in my notebook.

Part Three

Fisnik Ismaili: I forgot about Xhevdet Doda. In this period, when we started growing up in elementary school, everybody entered puberty before me. But I was the tallest guy in the class, then I was the fifth in the row in the physical education class because when we used to line up in physical education class, we were lined up from the tallest. I was a little insecure, {drinks} because all at once I wasn’t the tallest, and I started thinking I’m never going to get taller. In the meantime, my sisters got married and I grew up fast, now I got taller and all the neighborhood, all my classmates used to play basketball, and I was the tallest and couldn’t play.

I started playing in high school, I learned how to play in freshman year, I did it because they made fun of me for not knowing, so I put a hoop on my balcony, so all summer long in Dardania, I had a ball in my hands *bam-bum bam-bum* {onomatopoeia} I’m not saying that I ever was a good player, but I could at least play good enough to be accepted into society, to play for my class’s team, and once for my school’s team. And I learned how to play and created friendships... now except for class groups that defined our friendships, now those interest groups started forming.

It was trendy at that time, first it was football, the period of Pristina of the ‘80s, at the Prishtina Football Club, where again I was privileged because my father became head of the Club in those best years of Fadil Vokrri¹⁵, where I had access to the stadium and I could roam around there, if they went to play in Belgrade, I would just get on the bus and end up in Belgrade with them, in Zagreb, Split,

¹⁵ Fadil Vokrri was a football administrator and player. He was the president of the Football Federation of Kosovo from 16 February 2008 until his death on 9 June 2018.

Osijek, Rijeka, you name it. I went to go watch them, I didn't watch where the rest of the spectators did, I used to watch them from the bank of the children who pick up the balls.

We were two or three boys who were more privileged, it was the son of... I think his name was Urim, I just found out that he isn't alive anymore, he was younger than me, he was Qaza's son, the economist, he used to deal with economics, he used to pick up the balls, their sweaty jerseys, used to take care of the players, there was the son of the physiotherapist, the son the trainer of Pristina, Mirza Muzurović, Fuad Muzurović's son, the trainer. So, I used to stay there with them and I experienced that period of Pristina more from the stadium than the tribunes. And knowing them on a first-name basis, knowing all the players by their first and last name.

One of them, Luani, who gave me the comic books, our neighbor, used to play for Pristina, he didn't get to play often because he was Fadil Vokrri's substitute, substitute who in the end got married to my sister while my father was head of the Club. Now there was conflict there, ah {moves his head} that thing, we passed it. We loved Luan as children, he was very close with us, he was a sportsman, a football player, he used to play basketball, you used to beat us in basketball, football, ping-pong. He had a ping-pong table in his garage, there are some sportsmen who can play any sport. Luki was some sort of idol for us.

And all that experience, then I had that freedom to experience Pristina, the Prishtina Football Club in a different way, more closely. When Blažević from Croatia came, it was magnificent. Ćira used to come to dinner at our house, because my father found ways to bring him. He brought him to the Club. And I used to go out in the neighborhood and brag, or Fadil Vokrri used to come, the whole neighborhood would gather around the entrance of the building to wait for Fadil to get out from Fisi's apartment, he went over to Fisi's place. And I would get out with Fadil bragging, like look how close we are. I was tall up to his armpits {point to his body}.

And it was a good experience, so all those interest groups used to bring us together, cheering for Pristina, then the love for basketball grew. We were a group of people who played basketball from different neighborhoods, then we started being friends in high school, mix the different groups of friends. There was Mark Rodiqi, Arben Agani, Arben Krasniqi, Arbeni, two Arben were in Xhevdet Doda, Mark was at Ivo Lolla, who played professional basketball and we used to play streetball all the time. And our friend group widened, Mark was in Dragodan, Arben was in Dragodan, the other one in other parts of the city, the activity was bringing us together, and we went around the city more.

Then we discovered heavy metal, we started growing our hair...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: You were in gymnasium in the end of the '80s and the political atmosphere in the beginning of the '80s dramatically changes...

Fisnik Ismaili: Yes, it was very tense...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: How did you experience that at that age?

Fisnik Ismaili: We are... In '91, '91 was the last generation who finished school in the building of Ivo Lolla then, Sami Frashëri. After '91, they expelled them. So we were the last generation who finished four years there. There was an ethnic division there, when they gave us, the Albanians a shift, and a shift to Serbs. They were in the morning shift, four or five classes, we were in the afternoon. I don't

remember in which year it happened, maybe the second year, third or fourth. I just know, at some point, we didn't go at the same time because there were fights, there were...

I know I had a Serbian neighbor who we didn't talk to, like we gradually started to disconnect, to ignore each other and not talk, a tense situation, you know, it wasn't easy to see them walk into the building and not greet them. It was easier with neighbors, but with people in school, especially when you're entering puberty, you start feeling stronger, you start getting pimples and more muscular, and you just look to get into conflicts. I know, there were cases, two or three times that we got into fights with Serbs. I know once they were about to throw me out of school because the Serbian language teacher in class, we were in those classes that were like amphitheatres, there were only two or three in all of Sami Frashëri, two I think, these are stairs.

And in the break we used to throw chalk at each other, someone from up, down, *ba-pa-ba-pa* {onomatopoeia} throwing chalk at each other. While we are doing that, the Serbian language teacher walks in, we went back to our seats *vrrr* {onomatopoeia}. And the moment I sat, chalk flew from somewhere to her and *tuk* {onomatopoeia} touched her on her hand. Nothing serious. She just looked at us and went out of the class. The director came, she went from there {shows with his hands}, I was in the row near the door, from that row there, it hit her. And the director came, "Who did it?" They started interrogating us, it became a big problem.

Eh now, the head student of the class, who is my friend, and still in London, the head students got up and, from being scared, he tried to save the other two rows, he said, "Someone from this row threw it." And it was on us now, four tables, eight people. First two tables couldn't have done it, what to do now? The situation was very tense, one of my classmates, Dardha, got up and said, "I threw it." He didn't do it, I knew. I also got up and said, "I threw it, too." Expecting that the whole class would get up, "Me too, me too..." But nobody else did! (laughs) And they took disciplinary measures against both of us, but they didn't expel us, we were saved!

But we had situations like this, and just for something you said they could expel you, or harm you. There was a lot, a lot of tension. You lost sleep at night thinking, "What did I do, where did I go wrong, what did I say, why did I say it?"

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Your parents what did... Because I suppose they were working?

Fisnik Ismaili: Yes, they worked up to '89, in '89 they were expelled...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Because it was more of a radical change for them?

Fisnik Ismaili: After... after my father died, two years ago, two and a half years, I learned a lot of things that he did for the Shock Absorber Factory, for example, how... for example, they told me stories I didn't know. How Albanians were more discriminated against and he made some bold moves, that everyone was surprised he didn't get into trouble. Once, for example, Serbians had days off on holidays, they could... They had it easier, while on Albanian holidays, no one, no one cared. And a worker complains, and my father says, "OK..." I don't know what holiday it was, a holiday in which they did not eat meat, just fish, or something like that... for Orthodox Serbians...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Maybe they reduce meat on big holidays, whichever that may be...

Fisnik Ismaili: There is also one that they don't eat meat, they only eat fish... I don't know exactly! And he said, "OK." And when they were building the canteen... Did someone come in? [Addresses the interviewer]

Kaltrina Krasniqi: No, I just signaled, sorry.

Fisnik Ismaili: When they were building the canteen, they made special food for Serbians and someone from the Albanian community complained. Okay, so he made Ramadan, to eat iftar in the canteen. So it was, as a guy told me, there was no other factory that the canteen respected religions and adjusted to them, and for that it was very meaningful. He did things like this that they used to tell me, which put him in danger. Actually, my father after '89... you know now how much they attack my father and me...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Can you say his name so we can document it?

Fisnik Ismaili: Muharrem Ismaili. He was the director of the Shock Absorber Factory, Governor of the Bank of Kosovo, director of Bankkos, of the bakery Fushë Kosova. So he had experience leading big organizations, and also in the '80s he was the head of Prishtina's club on their best time. He was attacked a lot after the '90s, after '89, especially from Serbs who... when the violent measures took all the savings from the bank, Serbia had made big propaganda against my father. Even for that RTK money, I don't know if you remember an amount of money, some money from RTK that has disappeared, someone from RTK took it, I'm not sure who, one of the directors, but mostly from the savings of Albanians, which the bank, when the violent measures were taken, the funds were frozen and they were never given back to Albanians.

They tried to blame my father for this. There was news, he would watch TV, they said, "Muharrem Ismaili left the state with this many millions." He was in the middle of Pristina not knowing... it was really hard for him. So, this period now that they were attacking me as a Serbian collaborator, for my father, I would get more mad, it was a joke to him. He used to say, "What Serbs did to me at the end of the '80s, '90s, this is a joke you know, what Berat Buzhala says, or today's portals, or what Hashim Thaçi says about you in the Assembly." He used the Assembly pulpit to attack my father. I know this was a technique that was used, but whatever.

Today this technique is specifically used to oppress that pre-war class of intellectuals. Because these postwar commanders misused KLA and the values of war, these are those people who came to power without being intellectuals. They had to first oppress and silence that class of intellectuals, labeling them, threatening them, and they did not want problems, neither did their kids. But I was one of those who went against the, plus the fact that I was in the KLA, you couldn't label me much, as much as they try.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Your father was fired from work in '89?

Fisnik Ismaili: Yes, my mother, too. My mother was on disability pension a little earlier maybe, but my father didn't work in '89. At that time, I was 16-17 years old, how old was I in '89? Around 16. I fell in love {eats chocolate} with Laura. Sorry... Who today is the mother of my two children, my ex-wife. And I rebelled, she went to Xhevdet Doda, I went to Ivo Lolla, Kurrizi was opened, Pristina flourished.

Kurrizi was an area, maybe it's a little inappropriate, but I'm fixing my teeth and... Kurrizi was a zone where you had freedom from the bad things that Serbs could do to you, whether civilian or police. Because policemen were afraid to come inside Kurrizi when they were in small groups, because there were a lot of people, a lot of people gathered. If they would come inside the tunnel, who knows what you could do to them. But, there were moments when they came and inspected us, they took us out, they wronged us, but not that often. Yes, most of the time, we saw Kurrizi as a place where we could talk freely, we could express ourselves more freely...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What did you do?

Fisnik Ismaili: Kurrizi had a lot of cafes. Firstly, you had Bosna, I am starting from up, Bosna where you could eat a good burek, you had a pizzeria, I forgot the name... Amadeus maybe, I forgot the name, no, it wasn't Amadeus. That one was famous too. Then, when you got inside, because that one was like outside, when you got inside the tunnel, the first cafe in the left was Marigona. At Marigona, we listened to metal. That's where all my friends were staying, it was a small cafe, all of us with long hair were staying there and moving our heads, listening to rock. Down further, there were more random cafes where sometimes you could go in, and sometimes, no, I remember them, in the middle, there was Pastry Shop Bazar, it had the best cream-pie ever. And, at the exit, there was Restaurant Dubrovnik, older people went there, it's still there Dubrovnik now, if I am not wrong, that's where my father went to have fun. That wasn't the place to enter Kurrizi, it had access from outside.

A bit further there was MHz, I don't know. A bit before the exit, know from the other side of the tunnel, you had Beni Pizzeria, Beni, they made very good sandwiches and pizza. And, immediately at the exit on the right side, there was Blues Alley, which was a cafe where you could stay for the longest time, they had a kind of a garden in front where most of the people gathered. Blues Alley was a most frequented café where you hardly ever found a place to sit. We always stayed out there, and when it was closing time, when people started coming out... we gathered there, we stayed a bit more in front of Blues. Blues was the last cafe that closed before going home.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: At what time?

Fisnik Ismaili: At 12:00, 1:00, yes. He had a song that he always played, "Tin Pan Alley" by Stevie Ray Vaughan, that was the song of closing time. He always played that song, and we knew we had to go home.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Where there only boys, or where there also girls?

Fisnik Ismaili: No, there were girls, there wasn't a night that I didn't go out with Laura, we went out almost every night. We went to coffee shops every night with our friends, go around Blues, in the meantime we used to go to Beni, get a sandwich, sometimes we used to go up, kiss there, or go in the tunnel and kiss, we used to kiss in the tunnel, in corners. But we always kissed for half an hour. That was our routine. Then, we went back downstairs, meet our friends or at Marigona, or Blues Alley or somewhere, the fun continued and then we'd go home. Always, every night.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: When those dangerous inspections happened, what would happen?

Fisnik Ismaili: Nothing, we just ran.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What was the routine?

Fisnik Ismaili: No, we just ran. I don't remember, because I wasn't there, I was there like two times. We would leave without even seeing the police. It's not... Mostly the guys who wanted to cut our hair harmed us, Albanian. The moment they saw us with long hair, they wanted to harm us. A friend of mine...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Where would this happen?

Fisnik Ismaili: Well, look, if you went to Vranjevc or Mahalla e Muhaxherve, it wasn't good. It wasn't. You should not go that way, because they would harm you. But, sometimes they would come to Kurriz. But we used to stay 1-15 people together, to guard each other, but if they caught you alone or two people, and they were seven or eight... There was this one case, they cut a guy's hair with a knife (laughs). Like this, they would harm you. You, even among Pristina citizens, there were class differences that exist even today, some localistic differentiations, where there were villagers and townees. Even the neighborhoods were identified. Dardania, Ulpiana thought of themselves more as townees, and when you wanted someone... And the center, Pejtoni and these... And when we wanted to tell something about someone, to offend them, we would say, "He is from Vranjecv, or Mahalla e Muhaxherve", they were more crazy, you know, that's how we would differentiate, and actually that's how the movement among neighborhoods happened. Then it changed at some point because there were a lot of people who had to go to home schools. I wasn't here at that time because in '91, I get out of Pristina.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: From '81 until you finished high school, then what happened?

Fisnik Ismaili: I went in February '91. What happened at that time before the process of reduction happened, before you went to the army of Yugoslavia, you had to go Nis, where they did a checkup. They saw the condition you're in, then you'd get the call from the army. I remember, I don't remember the month, but that year... and they would take people in groups from neighborhood, schools, I don't know how they divided them, with schools, or neighborhoods, cities actually. But I wasn't here, I was in Ljubljana at my uncle's when that group went, when I got the call. And I went with some from Obiliq, it was a weird experience, with people I didn't know, you didn't know where you are, or what's happening... so, as interesting as it was, it also was weird as an experience and nothing...

The, we came back, I finished school, at the end of the year, up to the third year, I had all good grades, in the last year I failed a class, because I rebelled, I grew my hair, fell in love, I got a girlfriend, I spent the whole year with a single notebook in my pocket. Actually, that political situation removed the importance of learning, you know, nobody tried very hard to learn at that time. There were other struggles. That's when I got the courage to say to my [maternal] uncle, "I want to apply to graphic design." There were three free spots in graphic design... three students.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Once a year, or twice a year?

Fisnik Ismaili: I don't know if two... but I know there were three free spots, I think once a year. And I got the courage to say to my uncle, "Look, I want to register there," expecting that he won't approve, just like my father didn't my whole life. My uncle was so excited... and in the meantime he started working, he was a painter, all the time, he went to Croatia during the summer, he made portraits, and lived off that money all year. He was like, no one had more of a free spirit than him. But he started

working at *Rilindja*, making the illustrations of reading books. And I can say that's the period where those books were voted on, there were no better illustrations in those books than at that time. But it didn't last long and he was fired.

My uncle was very excited, and every day after his work at *Rilindja*, he came over to practice, make portraits, make... to prepare me for the entrance exam. And I was surprised at how he wanted me to advance. And I did that, I worked at it, I would make portraits of my friends, we used to sit them there {pretends to be drawing}, Laura, Valon, Vigan, different friends, my sisters, whoever was there, we would make a portrait of them and I got accepted, it was an extremely happy day, in August, if I'm not wrong, when I saw my name in the newspaper that I got in. One of the three, actually, four people got accepted that year. I know that we were about 40 people in the entrance exam. I was hoping, "Uncle, do you know anyone?" My uncle saying, "There is no change to get in by knowing someone..."

My uncle was like me today, his competing painters didn't like him very much, just like the professors of graphic design at UP don't like me today because we have conflicts, we don't agree on the methods of how they teach the students, to prepare them to work and like this. Actually, if he did one thing, he would make my acceptance there harder, that would be the fact that I was his nephew. Yes, I did good, you could see what the others are doing, and whoever passed by me... because the entrance exam was at the Monument of the Martyrs, where Ibrahim Rugova's grave is today, there because there wasn't a specific building where the entrance exams were held. It was held in nature. And now whoever passed by there and saw a cover of a book I was making would tell me, "Aa you will be accepted, you will be accepted..." you know, and I got accepted, and I was very happy.

It was September if I'm not wrong, in '91, there was an announcement that whoever was born in '73 should go to Pristina's cantonment, at that time, the war in Bosnia had not started yet, but it was known that something is going to happen. In the evening, Arben Agani was over at my house for a sleepover, we are very good friends, he lives in Washington today, we were very good friends. And we were hanging out and *opp* {onomatopoeia} the announcement, *bup bup bup* {onomatopoeia}. At that time, my sister was married, both of them married, the young one to Luani, the footballer, they went to live in Italy. Luan found a team there and was playing football. The next morning, Arben got out, we got up, got into a car, Arben got out, we hugged, we cried. We didn't know when we're going to see each other again, they got me into a car, took me to Skopje, from Skopje, I flew to Italy, my sister, I went there within that day. They got me out within a day. I didn't know how long I'm going to stay, or how I'm going to stay, or where I will end up...

My sister, now Luani, my sister's husband with his dad who now worked in Italy, they had come to Pristina. Vali, Valbona, my middle sister, lived in a relatively small apartment in which there wasn't space for many people, but for a month, she was just with her oldest son. And I stayed with her for a month, to wait and see what is happening. After a month, things weren't slowing down, the situation in Yugoslavia was just getting worse. It starts, in Slovenia in the meantime, I think, and now Luan with his father was coming back to Italy, and I had to leave since there was no more place for me. In the meantime, Laura, 16, 17 years old at the time, I was 18 years old. She was 17, and was quite in love and told her parents, "I'm going to Fisi." And she makes it happen, she insists so much, that a 17-years-old travels with Luan and his father, they come to Italy to meet me. We didn't know where to go from there.

And actually, they got off in Milan, we went, I went to Milan to meet them because I couldn't stay at my sister's, they were going there. And I met with Laura at the train station, I saw the two of them, we

greeted, and they went home. It was just me and Laura, 18 years old, she was 17, in the middle of Milan thinking. I had around six thousand marks, no, four thousand that my father gave me until I figured out what to do. Trying to figure out where to go. Some of my friends went to Norway, Laura insisted that we go to England, “We can speak a little English, it’s easier.” There were some classmates of mine there who I didn’t like, and they didn’t like them, because I was in a relationship with their classmate. And I thought that London was like Pristina, you see them everyday, you know, I didn’t want to go, *prt mrt* {onomatopoeia}, where are we going to go, what are we going to do? We had to decide there where we’re going next, we didn’t have anything to do in Milan.

Laura has a [paternal] uncle in Brescia, and she knew that he is going to take his brother’s sons, so Laura’s cousins, in Germany, he will go get them in Germany by car, and take them to England. Because back then you could go to England without visas, but if you were suspicious, they would give you the black stamp. So, you had to be very careful to get in, and we said, “Let’s call Skenda and just see if he left.” We knew he was going to leave these days. And Skenda luckily, misfortune, luck in misfortune, he had a car accident and took his car to be fixed, so he couldn’t leave in time for England, because he was going to leave two days earlier.

So he was waiting for his car to get fixed. He said, “Come to Brescia for a few days and we’ll decide what to do, you can come with me to London.” I said, “No way, I can’t make people uncomfortable in the car there,” you know, I felt bad. And we went to Brescia. He insisted, “Come, you have to come and I’ll take you to England.” And we got in the car, went to Germany, took Laura’s cousins, went to Luxembourg, Belgium, then in a ferry. We had to part there because, if they saw a car with six people in England, they would turn us back. So we parted. So, at England’s exit, they were four people in the car, we went walking. We didn’t have mobile phones or anything, so we were disconnected, we didn’t know if they got in, they didn’t know if we got in because there were two different roads.

So we got in! They didn’t as much, “Where are you going?” “We are tourists, to travel, see Europe.” We look like backpackers, like teenagers that take a year off after high school and want to see places. They let us in, a six-month visa, I mean the travel residence permit for six months. We got in and got to Victoria Station, a big station for... I had gone to Italy like two times to my sister’s, I went to my sister’s in the meantime, I went to Ljubljana two-three times, I traveled with Acropolis from Fushë Kosova to Ljubljana and I changed trains, so I knew what to do more or less. But again, when you end up in London 18 years old, with a 17-year-old, and you look up and see a huge station, you don’t know where to go, it’s...you have only one phone number, Luan’s number, my sister’s husband, which when we called, it didn’t work. The number didn’t work. There were no mobile phones, from a pay phone. And nothing, we ended up... there would come, some people who had hostels saw that you were tourists, they could come and say, “Do you want to sleep here..”

We went to a place, we slept there for two days, we didn’t know where to find Albanians. We had just a name Trokadero that is in Piccadilly. Let’s walk to Piccadilly. As a map lover, opened a map and found the road to Piccadilly. We went around Piccadilly for four hours looking for the coffee shop Trokadero. We would ask people for Trokadero, they didn’t understand what we’re talking about until I look up and see that the building was called Trokadero I could pronounce it, it was spelled as Trokadero but Trou-kha-deero [pronounced]. It was a shopping mall, it wasn’t a coffee shop, we were looking at coffee shops {shows with his hands}. A huge shopping mall. And we went in the shopping mall, and entrance is like a huge Italian restaurant with a lot of tables, where there were eight Albanian waiters and all the guests were Albanians. We were so happy! You go to a place where you don’t even know

where you're going, but I'm saying the decision was made at the Milan station. You didn't know how long you're going to stay. And then we got some connections with Albanians, we started working.

And, as I said, that night that I said goodbye to Arben Agani, when they took me from Pristina to Skopje, eight years later, I came to Pristina.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: How was London?

Fisnik Ismaili: Thanks to London I am the person that I am. And I am so, so thankful that fact that my parents got me out like that, and Laura that insisted that we go to London and everything. Because, when I think about it, I talked earlier about how we looked at other people, how we behaved with other people. Starting from class differentiation, racial differentiation, gender differentiation, sexual orientation, I went there as a judgmental person. When you saw an African-American, I mean Abdu was my friend as a kid, Hindus, Chinese, you looked at them a little... either judging... you know, homosexuals to the points where you would cross the road when you passed by a gay bar, you had... you know... things that when I think about today, I laugh.

There are things that have influenced my character and really, when you live in a big place like London and you see all that variety, how to say in Albanian, that diversity of people, cultures, you understand how we're not the center of the universe as we'd like to think. And how valuable are the other cultures, other languages, other nations, which we despise. And actually, when you look at it, each of them has their own traits, even if they are not good to us, they have food, or a tradition, or a custom that is worth respecting, do you understand?

And there you start learning the most important thing, as I see it, to not judge people. Except that, you also learn, see everything that is in this world. That's when I understood the depth of *Star Trek* that I watched. *Star Trek* is a ship that explores different worlds which deal with different cultures. Then that's when I understood that you don't need a cosmic ship to go to different planets, those are the differences, you have so many different cultures in this world, which is a big part of them you could meet in England, without needing to travel the world. And this is the most pleasant part, most thankful that I got from London. It is a great city, it is a city that manages 13 million people who go around there every day. And you look at it and think how can it work that well.

It is a city that gives you the chance to work if you want to, it will give you a chance, but it will not go well always. It is a city where, three years later, where from the pressure, we couldn't study immediately because we had to... this was interesting, to be a resident in England, you had to live there for three years. So we had a visa for six months and we were hoping that things will settle down here before then and we come back. When we saw that things weren't settling down, we had to seek political asylum in '92 immediately. As asylum seekers, we had some benefits, we found a better apartment, we started living a little, we worked illegally a little. We started to consolidate, but our primary goal was to register at university.

Now the pressure from my father was great, great. Two of my sisters got married, neither one of them got into university so I had to... now I didn't know what I want to study. To study design, you had to go to another school for two years before... to get into arts, they had this in arts and medicine, these were extra, you didn't know where or how... And to get a scholarship and to be able to afford these... the school payment, you had to live in England for three years to be an England resident, and then you would be a student from there, not a foreign student, because, as a foreign student, a year would cost

ten thousand marks, you couldn't afford it. So, we waited for three years, both of us, so we could study, we worked.

I worked as a house painter, I worked... I washed dishes, I sold clothes in the market, I sold shoes, the kind of jobs everybody did. I just couldn't work as a waiter, because to be a waiter... the Albanians who worked as waiters would tell me, "Cut your hair because they won't take you with long hair, because your hair will fall on the food..." I said, "Why should I cut my hair? Why do I have to work as a waiter?" "But look, we're all working as waiters." For real, they were all waiters, they would find jobs for each other easier, because it was the easiest to find a job as a waiter. And I was like that, headstrong, and rebellious, "I will work, but it doesn't mean I will work as a waiter. I want to grow my hair." And I accidentally found a job ad a house painter and learned how to paint, I still know how to, then I'd wash dishes and things like this.

In the meantime, Laura gets pregnant, after two and a half years. The year that we wanted to study, Vigan was born in July. He was born in July, we started university in October, both of us. Living in England, just to have a child is extremely expensive. To have a kid, to study with a two-three-month-old baby is extremely expensive and hard. And what did our mothers do, they got visas, and both of our mothers came to help us. They stayed for about two-three months. But there came a moment where we saw we couldn't do it without one of them, and it's going to be hard. So which one is going to stay, which one is going to stay *vh vh vh* {onomatopoeia} Laura's mother decided to stay, mine went back. She stayed to help us.

Then gradually her husband came, their daughters, sometime after five years, around 43 of her family members came. Like this, pulling each other. They would find jobs, the sister would come, then the brother, she had two [maternal] uncles, a [maternal] aunt, like this, cousins, you name it, 43 family members of hers came... or if they were in asylum in other places, they came to England. Only my older sister with her three daughters came. So her parents helped us. Laura's parents helped a lot with Vigan, my oldest son, otherwise, we couldn't have both finished university.

Part Four

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What did you study? What did you study?

Fisnik Ismaili: In the meantime, I discovered the computer and I liked it, I fell in love with computer animation, that was a new field back then, very new. And actually there was only one university in England that offered that course, and I just was doing something at home, I bought... I got some money to buy a computer, I would do things at home. And I sent my documents to Portsmouth and I was convinced I will get registered there. There is no one who can change my profession. Because in England you could apply to six places, and one of them... I didn't, only wrote one, because there only one like that, I didn't want something similar.

And I managed to go meet with them beforehand and when they saw my work, they said, "We will definitely call you to the interview." From 350 people that would apply, only 70 would be called to the interview, they put me on that list of 70 people, from which 30 would be accepted to study. In the meantime, I don't know what happened... because the equipment was very expensive, and the art schools decided that the other courses like painting, sculpting should start using computers, so it

meant that computer animation would be closed, and that field didn't exist anymore, suddenly. While I was expecting to get accepted there, to start in October, it was a hard moment for me, I took it very hard because, at one moment when I started seeing my future, I started seeing myself doing special effects on Hollywood and working on star project movies, it was over.

And then I don't want to go to university, I wanted to be autodidact, to learn computer animation by myself, you know. But try doing that with a person like Muharrem who called you everyday pressuring you, "Come on apply anywhere, just apply somewhere." My good luck there was a course, before starting, now I had to see what sports were free, there was a magazine where everybody had registered, but they would take people for the free spots left. There were some lamer courses, I see there 25 free spots in multimedia, they all had two, three free sports, "Why 25, no one went, why didn't I see this last year when I applied?"

And I find out that it is a just accredited field, which couldn't get accredited earlier, like it was served to me. And it was similar to what I did earlier and I applied there, and my whole life changed. I went into multimedia and it was a combination of graphic design and computers that I always wanted to do.

In the meantime, we worked a lot, especially me during university, I worked security in bars at night, I would sell clothes during the weekend, so during the holidays I would sell shoes with my friends. Then we started, before finishing university, we started translating. Translating was paid well. As translators we had to travel a lot, but you would also earn money. Both of us started translating, clean job, you wouldn't annoy anyone, you would only deal with Albanians.

That, when a bigger flow of people, we're talking about when we started studying '95, in '98, in '98, we both finished it. Actually I almost failed the last year because then, when it happened in March, when Adem Jashari was killed, I didn't go to school, I didn't go until the summer to lectures at all. I was trying to come here and fight.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: How were you trying to come?

Fisnik Ismaili: I was thinking.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Aha, you were thinking.

Fisnik Ismaili: Yes, because, during the war in Bosnia, I was very angry that Serbia took me out of here, I was very angry. And when I saw what was happening in Bosnia, you know I would say, "I should go, I should go!" Laura would say, "Stay, when it happens in Kosovo, you can go." You know, hoping that it will never happen. "Yes, yes," you know, "We'll wait when it happens in Kosovo. When it happened in '98, then my [maternal] uncle who was in Ljubljana, he was a military. After a few months he disappeared, we knew he went to the KLA,¹⁶ but no one knew where he was. And I was very anxious, I wanted to know where he is, I wanted to join him. And from March, I took it very hard. But I had a very good mentor for my diploma thesis, who, when I went to university around May, he said, "Fis," he said,

¹⁶ Kosovo Liberation Army.

“Look, because you’re close. Just get it over with. Finish your diploma thesis,” he said, “And the other exams, I’ll postpone them,” he said, “For summer,” he said, “Just finish your diploma thesis.”

I finish the diploma thesis, for eleven days, I sat and worked, I finished it in eleven days. Then during the summer, he postponed some exams not in June, but sometime in August, I finished those exams, and I finished university. And life changed dramatically for us because now Laura became a pharmacologist, and I became a multimedia specialist, and we made quite a lot of money as translators, now to start from zero... Our career started from zero, because as just graduated students, from the salary we got as translators, it could be one hundred euros, hundred pounds, we ended up with 800-pound-a-month salaries (laughs), just to get into our professions.

And then we continued. I know an agency, I was very lucky that I was accepted, I was very lucky. There was an agency that took students like this, gave them horrible salaries, but they had very good clients, you know, Apple Europe, British Airways, and they saw... They wanted an employee, they had two good candidates, they didn’t know who to pick, me or a girl who was a good illustrator. Now I was a good designer, but he had designers and that girl was a good illustrator. And they wanted her too and... when they say how excited I was to start and all that, they decided to take us both. They decided to hire both of us. Okay! And from there then I got into my profession and I worked very hard, I worked 16 hours a day. I loved and I still love this profession extremely. And in England, they give you... when you want to work, they can misuse you, but they also know how to value you. But you have to jump from job to job sometimes.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: So you had a child...

Fisnik Ismaili: Yes, until... Yes, wait because still, this job that I started, three months later I went to war (laughs). I started working in December. I started working in December in ‘98, I was very active at that time and I co-founded the Albanian Students' Association, while we were studying, we were around 250 people, a lot of us studied. And we were quite active, we would, we would organize demonstrations in favor of NATO attacks in Serbia, and when they would come, they would meet with heads of different states, we were protesting there. I did the NATO Air Just Do It, I don’t know if you remember that slogan, it was on CNN.

But those protests were over, I started working, NATO intervened, one day when I was in my office, I saw the news about a four-year-old kid that they found, they attacked him, a family. There were witnesses that they took a family, they killed them, and they took a little kid, and the next day, because they used to put Albanian’s bodies in front of the houses, and the next day, they see the kid with the other bodies. They examined the kid, he was burned with cigarettes in his body, they took and tortured the kid all night, then they dropped him with the other bodies.

And, when I started reading about that child, and I know that Vigan was four years old, the same age... I started crying, I started crying out loud in the office, I couldn’t hold back anymore, you know, knowing, “Why does my child have the luck of being here safe, while another kid of the same age that doesn’t know anything...” You know, I just imagined, what did he know, thinking, “Why is this man burning me with a cigarette... with this thing.” And I was terrified, I just told them, “I’m going to war!”

Kaltrina Krasniqi: How did you make that decision? How did you do it?

Fisnik Ismaili: Look, I always had in the back of my mind that I will go. I just told the people at my office, they saw me crying, “I want to go to war.” “What do you mean you want to go?” “No, I’m going to go.” “Go home,” they said, “Stay home, it’s Friday tomorrow, calm your head over the weekend, don’t do anything stupid. You can contribute from here.” They always said this, “You’ll contribute more by sending money,” by sending money while I was making 800 pounds a months. With 800 pounds, we barely made it through the month. We saved a little, you know, we got better, but not much. And okay, they told me, “Go home, think about it, calm down.” “Okay!” I went home and told Laura, “I’m going.” She said, “I knew you’d say that.” She knew me, I really I am headstrong, when I say something, you need to kill me to change it. When I say something that has to do with me, I can’t change my mind, maybe move my principles, but when I say I’m going to do something, I finish it.

There were moments when I slapped myself saying, “Why did I talk?” You know, “Why did I rush?” Because then I started thinking, I was 25 years old, “Where am I going, where am I leaving my son, Laura? What if I don’t come back, how are they going to live, what are they going to do?” I called work the next day, I said, “I’m coming to say goodbye and I’m leaving.” We said goodbye, they bought me a gift. The way they said goodbye after working at the agency for three months, they promised I’ll have a job when I come back, and the way they said goodbye and everything made me love them ten thousand times more and realize that they’re so understanding, so cool. They handled it so well, they made going there easier. The moment they said, “You’ll have a job when you come back.” My biggest worry went away. I would say, “I’m not going there to die. I’m going to fight and come back.” I left thinking that. The moment I knew I would have a job when I come back, I was relieved and had no worries.

And nothing. I actually called my [maternal] uncle in Ljubljana, to see if he talked to his wife, and where he is, because it had been months that we didn’t know where he is. Luckily he was in Ljubljana those days, because it was known something is going to happen in Koshare, the border. And he came back to see his family before going back to action. I said, “Uncle, where are you? What’s happening?” I said, “Why did you come to Ljubljana?” He said, “Just because I wanted to see my family. I’ll go back to Tirana.” I said, “I want to come!” “Are you sure?” “Yes!” “Are you sure?” “Yes!” He didn’t say, “Don’t come!” Or, “There’s no need to!” Nothing.

When the family found out started calling him, “Why did you tell Fis to come, you know he’s the only boy in the family, you know this...” “More,” he says... you know, my other uncle’s pressuring him, telling him, “Are you crazy, tell Fis not to come.” “He wants to come,” he was telling them, he is a person of principle, military, “He wants to come, he decided to come. Why don’t you come too? They said, “Mmmmmhm.” And nothing! We met at my sister Vali’s in Italy, Vali is like our meeting point. From there on a train to Bari, Bari-Durrës.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: It seems very interesting to me that you took such a dramatic turn in your life because you went to another city, finished your studies. You started that career that you dreamed of and then you decided to go to war. Very weirdly motivated.

Fisnik Ismaili: It was some sort of rancor, I am very resentful, I admit. And I admit another thing that justifies it saying that, “I am persistent rather than headstrong.” Because there are resentful people that even if, even if they know they’re wrong, they’re headstrong and don’t admit it. I am persistent up to the point where I see I am wrong and I admit it, but I’m persistent until I try what I want to do. And, I don’t know, the resentfulness of having to leave Kosovo, I could never settle in England, I never had a home in England. Sometime in ‘97, the state gave us an apartment, I fixed it a little and told myself, “Settle!” But I knew I’m coming back, the day will come to be back, and a lot of compatriots that went there at the time didn’t... they advanced in school and everything, but they didn’t settle.

And we talked often, the moment you plant roots somewhere you can’t put them somewhere else, and you’re stuck as a global citizen, wherever you go it becomes home. I was like that in a way, because I also traveled while I was in America, I was in some places and I saw that you can take me anywhere and I would settle, I could work, I could live. And I saw that no place felt like, like home. Not even now, there are moments when I don’t feel at home even here. Tomorrow go somewhere else to feel comfortable. But I say here again because I’m headstrong, persistent and from resentment.

I’ll tell you how it went. I was so resentful that they took me out of Kosovo, that brought me back to war.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: You had no military experience...

Fisnik Ismaili: Zero, at all, never!

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What did you think you’re going to do when you came?

Fisnik Ismaili: I don’t know. And the story of how I ended up where I did is interesting.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Describe that moment to us, you probably weren’t in Albania before, or were you?

Fisnik Ismaili: No, no. In Albania, I imagined, when I arrive in Albania, I’m going to kiss the ground, you know, *aaa*, you know...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Incomp. (18:58).

Fisnik Ismaili: Yes, first on the ship, we threw up because it was a fast and light ship and there were waves, and my uncle was the only one who didn’t throw up. All the people on the ship got on the floor, he would just look at us, we were dying. All the people on the ship wanted to die, we were like 150 people, he would just look at us, laugh at us. To die! I was resentful. And he made it seem so bad to me, I was an idealist, “I will kiss the ground and...” “O,” he said, “When we get there, put your head down and come behind me!” Because, at that time, I didn’t know the friction amongst, amongst the two battalions of the KLA, frictions, not frictions, but the movements of Serbian espionage were there on the borders to see how they come in, because now they would find out someone is coming from abroad to fight, they found out then that I came and they started looking for my parents in Pristina because they stayed here during the bombing. And they went to their house to kill them, but they went to my aunt’s. So, information was leaked.

My uncle was very, very careful from these, but there was no way to be safe, there was no privacy. And we got off somewhere in Durrës, and he said, “Put your head down, don’t talk to anyone.” There were some beggars all over, almost sticking to our feet. We got into a van, went to Tirana.

In Tirana he took me to, I didn’t even know where I am, I didn’t know about the frictions, or the commanders, nothing at all, zero, idea... I came to fight. We went to Lapraha, there were the headquarters of the Ministry of Defense back then, so it was from the government of Bujar Bukoshi.¹⁷ I didn’t have any idea, now that they say that was FARK,¹⁸ or if it wasn’t. When I went, it was never mentioned, I had no idea. I went there, I had no idea how it works, I didn’t know there were other headquarters, the general headquarters. I didn’t know there were frictions, zero, at all. Before entering my uncle told me, “From this moment, you’re not my nephew, I am not your uncle. It is safer for you and for me if they don’t know we’re family!”

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Why?

Fisnik Ismaili: Because someone can, so he was an officer in the Agim Ramadani Brigade in Koshare, of which I still didn’t know anything, nothing, we wouldn’t tell me anything. They could misuse me to get to him, do you understand, to compromise him or blackmail him, and the other way around, they could use him to do something to me. But he said, “Don’t open up!” He didn’t trust anyone. And later I realized that he had a lot of reasons not to trust people, the injustice done to us by the people who lead this country today, which I can’t say anything about, because I wasn’t in that chain of command where I saw, I heard the talk, I can tell you what I heard and I heard a lot, but I don’t have the complete picture to say who did what exactly, I hope the day comes and those cards open, but I can’t say anything because I was just a soldier, but with a very sensitive duty.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What did you do?

Fisnik Ismaili: I’ll just explain how we got there. There was a procedure: when you went to Tirana headquarters, they took in one of the, there were two villages where they would train for two weeks, Babina, it was... I forgot the other two villages. There was another one with the letter B, I forgot. There were three villages, when they took me to Babina, they turned the village school into a small cantonment. So the facility, that’s where the soldiers slept, they surrounded the building with barbed wire so the residents couldn’t get in, and they couldn’t get out. And there was another facility there outside in which there were some beds, not much space. And I come, they appointed me to a group of five people to launch mortars, 82 millimeters, you know that you put in the group, you put the projectile and *puup* {shows with his hands}, and it launches like four kilometers away I think, and we trained for two days, I had never touched a mortar, I didn’t know how...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Did you know any kinds of weapons?

Fisnik Ismaili: No. But my father had a gun which I would take and play sometimes, but I never shot it. There we shot rifles, we would train with rifles. I trained for two days, the groups would train together

¹⁷ Bujar Bukoshi served as Prime Minister of the self-proclaimed Republic of Kosova from 1991 to 2000. He is one of the founders of the Democratic League of Kosovo.

¹⁸ Armed Forces of the Republic of Kosovo.

for two weeks then they would take them to the front line. The like had just started, the Battle of Koshare had just started, I don't remember the dates exactly, but sometime around April 9. So I know that, okay, April 8, 9 I went to Babina. I trained for two days. With those 82s, we learned the different parts, how to learn, how to take aim, we learned everything. I was there with four other guys, I had never seen them before, they were learning without experience, like me. And we were trying to figure out who will go in which position, the one who was more clever should aim, when they gave you the coordinates, you had to xxxx {onomatopoeia} change it in five seconds, to put those to know where...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Where to go...

Fisnik Ismaili:... where to aim the mortar. And for that you had to be clever. But the pipe and a tile that were there, were heavy, you needed big people who could lift heavy things, now they assigned me to lifting things, but when we were training, I did it the fastest. He would say, "How should we give you..." Who held the aim had a bag this small {shows with his hands}, "How should we give you this small bag when it should be you who holds a plate which places 25 kilograms on your back." Like this, not knowing what kind of duty I'll have. And one night, but all of these are some moments that have changed my life.

One night we came back from training, we went to eat, I left the school, I was sleeping in the facility outside of school. As I was going into the facility, maybe three steps behind me, I had gone inside the facility, and the person who went out of the school I had not seen maybe until the end of war. He was Gani, a former Yugoslav Army soldier who lived in London and worked in Sllatina as a liaison, and came to war. Now he came to war that day and met with the commander and said, "I'm the liaison officer." They said, "Kuku¹⁹, there are no liaisons in the front line."

The war started there, at the border, they were having trouble communicating. And they say to Gani, "Go there immediately, here are the soldiers, choose the soldiers to form the liaison department," and goes in the yard and sees me entering the object, "Fis!" "Gani!" "Where are you? This and that," he said, "They ordered me to create the liaison department because we are..." I said, "Okay, congratulations! Did you find soldiers?" He said, "No, I want to take you." I said, "But I am with the 82s, I can't come just like that." He said, "I'm going," he said, "I'll make the request to the commander." Because Musë Dragaj was the commander of that school, that mini cantonment. He went to Musa, said, "I found a soldier, I want to take him." I would say, "I don't know anything about liaisons. What do I know about radio connections?" But I was in some radio contests, he knew that I switched frequencies, he said, "Oh, you know more than these I see here."

I didn't tell you, some guys had issues with aim, now I don't want to brag, but they had issues with, completely inexperienced. He said, "At least you know computers and stuff," I had taken scanners, a digital camera from London, the digital camera camera had just come out, I bought it, 600 pounds. I had these kinds of equipment, mouse, I didn't have a laptop. But I brought these kinds of things they might need. For example, when I gave them the scanner, they really needed it, they didn't know they might need it, and it was very helpful. Anyway, Gani was persistent, and I said, "Whatever the commander says." I was a soldier, I didn't know anything. And he went, he says to Musa, "This, his."

¹⁹ Colloquial, expresses disbelief, distress, or wonder, depending on the context.

Musa had no idea who I was. "I found a soldier!" The moment they found out in the front that... Babina is a village near Bajram Curri, so there's some road until there. The moment they found out that the liaison department was formed, we immediately got the order to go there.

So, without finishing the two weeks of training, because the liaison department doesn't face the frontal war, the liaison department gets into a hole and it communicates there. But you have to find ways of communicating. Now what had happened in Koshare, the front line had widened. Now, when the front line widens, those little radio connections you have started not hearing each other. And we went up there with Gani, I remember it as if it were today, Agim Ramadani was killed that night. I didn't know who he was, I had never heard of him, when you're completely disconnected in another place.

We got in, we went up there after a, because at first we started going with a car, but Serbs would shoot, even inside the Albanian territory, they started throwing grenades in that road, we had to get out of the car, and go up the mountain, there I had a walk, I was quite fat even back then, I don't know how I handled walking with a 40-kilogram backpack on my back. And we arrived in Padesht, Padesht is a village, it had a home which was the base... a village in Albania which is like, you could see the Kosovo border from there, so very near. Now when the war blew up, it spread inside Albania, now we had the military area three-four kilometers behind, because Serbs would come this way, they tried to explain to us from behind {explains with his hands}, and this was in the middle. And there was the base of everything that was happening.

Anton Qudi, Rrustem Berisha, who today are parliament members, used to sleep there, Sali Çeku who is a hero, Agim Ramadani, Abaz Thaçi. And we went inside, they looked horrible, we didn't know what was happening. They looked at us, Gani was this short {shows with his hands}, older than me, bald with a beard. I was tall, fat. Rrusta looks at us, "Who are you?" Gani said, "I am," he said, "The military liaison. The liaison department leader." He was immediately superior, because the moment you had military experience in former Yugoslavia, you would be superior. He said, "I'm the superior of the liaison department, he is my soldier." Rrusta looks at me and says, "You, get out!" He made me go out. I was stuck in the hallway, I was cold, until they talked for about two hours. I met a guy there, he was telling me a little about how things were, I had no idea, Sefer, Sefer Berisha was telling, trying to tell me what is happening.

The border had just been broken, no one knew what was happening. Gani and Rrusta came out, and Rrusta opened, there was a two-story house, a big room upstairs, two smaller rooms and a hallway. It was a house, a stone tower, the door was up to here {shows with his hands} I had to go in like this {lowers his head showing how he had to bend to get inside}. And downstairs there, two bigger areas, two bigger rooms. The ones upstairs were separated, two small rooms.

And upstairs were the headquarters where the commanders would sleep, these two rooms were used as warehouses, some soldiers slept there, and some other commanders. And two rooms, one was not used, which they gave to us, small. And they said, "Connect the device here, because we had to connect it..." Did you notice when taxi drivers talk, sometimes you can't hear other taxi drivers, but you can always wire the base, so the base talks to a taxi driver, but you can't hear their response. So

we wire the base for when two radio connections couldn't communicate with one another, they communicated through us.

So it is very important because he says, "Attack from here, or be careful there," you have to interpret word by word to the other person, and you have to know who to call and tell them. And this duty that I had, for the first time, but Gani didn't deal with radio connections in war either, he did it in Sllatina at the airport, but not in war. And we found the frequencies, we hooked everything up. We fixed it.

Now I can connect wires too, so we connected the wires, then the house didn't have power, so we found a generator, we needed that generator to charge the batteries of the radio connections of those on the front line, when they came, we had to charge them somewhere. There was no power there. We made a system, because we had a kitchen, the kitchen was built later, the kitchen was even further. And while we were going, he took the batteries, went to the front line, gave them food and batteries and took the empty ones, gave them to us, we would charge them.

And like that, we made sure that through logistics, we had this brigade, had nonstop communication with no problems with radio communications. In the meantime a guy goes, Burimi... When Rrusta came in that small room after three days, when he saw what did, all lit up, he said, "What are you guys?" It was all high-tech. And Burimi came, a young boy, and he said he was a carrier, he carried wounded people, that was his duty. These soldiers' duty was to go when someone gets wounded, give them first aid, and carry them up to the road where a car would come to get them and heal them.

Carriers were very strong, and they were fast. Burimi was a legend, very clever, student of electronics, very clever. He came one day and said, "Look, this is not my job, but in Karauta, Koshare where we took the military facility," he said, "There are some radio connections of Serbians that they threw in the basement," he said, "And they want to ruin them," he said, "I studied electronics, I fix these kind of things," he said, "It's a shame to ruin those, we can use them." I said, "Bring them here immediately. Those are the Serbian army centers."

So you turn one on, and you can hear what they are saying. He found a donkey, put those things on him and he brought them, connected them, I turned them on and listened to what Serbians are talking about. When Burim had free time, he came and fixed equipment that would break, the radio connection, he started fixing them, and Gani made a request, "We want him on our team!" And we were too many people for that small room, so they gave us one of the rooms downstairs, and we became high-tech, the room was as big as this one, this area {shows with his hands}, maybe smaller, smaller, it was quite smaller.

And we got in and put those things there, the radio connection of Serbians in a corner, the radio connection of Albanians in another corner. And I mostly dealt with listening to them because the knowledge I got from comics, movies in Serbian I watched, and it all helped me in this profession I didn't know I was going to have, that I got. I started listening to them and find out where, we looked at the map, and we looked for where our people were fighting, for example, our people had nicknames, how would I know, 326 was Hysen Berisha, The Beard, this, that.

Now you know 327 were fighting and we started listening to them, where Serbs are fighting. Where the activity was. And there was one called Džavo, *džavo* in Serbian means “the devil,” and Džavo, when Džavo would attack, I would hear Hysen’s soldiers communicating, and you knew Džavo was fighting with them. And more or less I found out their positions and their nicknames, and the, how do I say, Serbian garrisons. And I know which nickname faced who, I learned it all for a week. And then based on that information, when a spotter that wanted to attack us would appear, spotters are one or two people who go deep into our territory, they don’t kill people, they just observe and tell artillery that, “Six-seven kilometers behind, shoot here, here, here, kill this one.” Now I started to learn the coordinates, when he would give the coordinates, I would call them and say, “Where did the projectile fall?” They would tell me, “Here!” And we more or less knew which spotter, where he is going to attack, with what are they going to attack. So sometimes, after two weeks, I knew 99 percent exactly when a spotter talked, where they’re going to attack, I knew whom they will shoot.

Now until he gave him the coordinates, until he aimed, until he armed the barrel of the mortar, until he launched it, until it went off, it took around 45 seconds until it hit you. Now within that minute, you had to find who, who is being shot, and say, “Get out of there!” And they went away, and the missile would fall onto an empty place. Now the spotter would maybe see them go away or not, but if he said, “You didn’t kill anyone!” They would say, “Stay there, give us coordinates until we kill someone!” The spotter would say, “Aaaa, you blew up seven people.” I would call, “Are you okay?” They would say, “We’re okay! We’re super!” He would say, “Aaa, you blew up five people.” He would overstate the number like, “You were successful.” They on the other side, “No we’re okay, you told us on time and we went away.”

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Were people dying?

Fisnik Ismaili: Who?

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Albanians.

Fisnik Ismaili: Yes, 114 were fallen martyrs. But this was in cases, now you couldn’t, there were confrontations bullet-to-bullet, you couldn’t. I am talking about the ones we could stop, usually artillery communications, which included people with radio communications, we intercepted those almost every time and we cut them and got the best out of them. There were cases when there were soldiers on the front line or there were cases where NATO hit us and killed 15 people, and another time, NATO hit us twice.

There were cases where a lot of people were killed and those three, four first days before existing... I’m not saying that the liaison department saved the brigade, but it played a key role in two things: one and the most important thing was to take care of our people, take care in the sense of knowing to forestall what they had to do, which we did very well. And the other one was, when a sporadic piece of information leaked from them, we used that to hit them. And there were cases when they had huge losses from a piece of information, a single thing he would say on the radio connection. You just had to stay ready, I listened for 24 hours straight. And we had to learn what are they talking about when they talked in code, learn codes. Luckily we had officers of former Yugoslavia who knew some codes, and when I didn’t understand something, I’d say to Anton Quni, “What did he mean when he said

this?” He would explain it, I would write it down, I would memorize them. And I didn’t even need a week and a half to learn everything about them.

And then, now people, people think it was easy, because you stayed in a hole and listened, and you had to very attentive all the time to get the information that you needed and to pass that information. Now you had all those separate regiments, and you gave someone two pieces of information a day, someone one, someone... we would distribute it, we would distribute to the whole brigade around 20 pieces of information a day, but for them, you know, someone got it, someone didn’t, you know, it didn’t seem like we were doing much to them, but we did a lot, because we had to manage the whole brigade, which started with 150 people, and they became 1500 people. And all the communicating and the listening was organized by us, people heard.

Then through radio connections, we connected with Suhareka in some places. We connected with Ramushi’s people in Glllogjan, with whom we hadn’t communicate for months, we had no idea what was happening, they cried on the radio connection from happiness. People knew us as Koshare’s liaisons. I can freely say that for three months in the Battle of Koshare, 144 people were killed. If I’m not wrong, in the Battle of Pashtrik, which lasted two weeks, about over 240 people were killed. Now if in a place 250 people are killed for two weeks, while here for three months only 144, that says something. Considering that the Battle of Koshare is known as the hardest battle that happened to the KLA, because it really was a confrontation that we had around, we had around twelve thousand Serbian forces in front, and it really was a harsh confrontation, and considering that that force that was sent at us, with 114 killed people, for that time in comparison with other places, says something.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Were you scared?

Fisnik Ismaili: It’s interesting, I saw cases where either you would be very scared or you weren’t scared at all. I was, I was the one who, this is interesting, the feeling of war. I tried to analyze it even later. For fear of disappearing like that, it is a very good feeling, but when I think about it today, I’m a little scared, I say, I’ll tell you how this continued for me even after the war. The most appealing part of war emotionally was the fact that you went to the most basic level of life, survival. You were there or you were going to die, so kill or be killed. You didn’t have to think.

Then your mind is so free, you don’t have to think about electricity bills, you don’t worry about going to work tomorrow, “do I have gas in the car?”, “do I have diapers for my kid?,” or even if I have a kid at all. No worries, everything disappears, and there’s this feeling, that animal instinct just to survive, you know what kind of mental freedom that gives you, you had no other worries. Eat, drink to survive, fight to survive, nothing else. To win and stay alive! To experience the win. Because from the cases I saw, whoever said “I came to die for Kosovo!” died.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Were you sad?

Fisnik Ismaili: In the beginning... and I am sensitive to blood and these things. It’s interesting how they’re cut off, you don’t have feelings. But when you would get scared, then you would understand that every loss is war is part of that process, it’s collateral damage and you would forget, you, “Okay,

he died. The rest of us have to stay alive.” You had no time to be sad, you know, you would feel sorry, you would feel pain there and they had no time to think about that.

Actually, a little before the war, my [maternal] uncle was wounded. And when they told me, that’s when they found out he is my uncle, only two-three people knew, Gani and some, two-three people I was closer with. And then when they found out, they were saying, “How could you not tell?” You, “Uncle and nephew, are you crazy?” Then, “No, you know how Bashkim is. Actually yes, Bashkim is like that, very strict, military.” But when he saw he was wounded, while they were taking him to the hospital, he said, “Take all my clothes, everything you take off me, all my possessions, everything that is mine, put it in a box and take it Fis.” They asked, “Why Fis?” “Because he is my nephew.” “How is he your nephew?” Then they brought me his things, asking me, “How come you didn’t tell?” “My uncle didn’t want to tell.” Everything okay. My uncle survives, he had a wound here from a shell {shows with his hands}, nothing serious. They thought it was serious but he survived. And, why did I start talking about this because I lost it a little...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: About sadness...

Fisnik Ismaili: Yess, sadness. And I know when they were about to tell me, because now everybody found out he was wounded except me. And Gani with my best friends sat me there and say, “Fis, we want to talk to you about something.” And the first thing I thought was, “They are going to fire me.” You know, when your manager wants to talk to you, then I said, “Wait, I’m at war, he can’t fire me.” I remember that moment (smiles), in the end, “What happened?” He said, “Bashkim is wounded.” I expected to be sad, I was stuck, this was towards the end of war, I was stuck, I said, “Is he okay, is he alive?” “Yes!” You know, somehow I accepted his death as a part of that, we were used to, you know, I may be sounding cold-hearted when I say this, but I’m telling you how I felt then, I had no feelings then, zero, at all, no fear, no worries. I don’t know, an indescribable freedom. So that feeling continued for me while I was going back to my normal life, society.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Until when were you at war?

Fisnik Ismaili: Until it was over, 11... Yes, yes, 11 [June], in the meantime, on the last day, a good friend of mine was killed, there was a team who baked *burek*. They were, I don’t know, the legends of the brigade for me. They made 250 *burek* a day, which meant once a week someone would eat *burek*, until it was their turn. But the day we had *burek* was the happiest day of a soldier, there were three people who made them. The last day, a day after the Agreement was signed, June 12, Serbs hit that house. That house was hit, launched, the shell fell on that house’s yard during the whole war, during the whole period of Koshta because they knew there was that with triangulation, that’s the method, they knew the waves were coming out of there, but it’s like a valley, so they didn’t know exactly, but there were shells in the yard all the time. But on the last day, when we let our guard down, they got up on top, saw where we were and launched two shells.

But I was in Tirana that day, because my uncle was wounded, and I went to see my uncle, and they killed Aziz that day. Aziz was one of those soldiers that made people happy once a week. There, you know, it went... I want to show the importance of the logistics and the part that... I’m telling you during the whole war I never shot a bullet, except when we trained, I didn’t need to shoot, that was

our job. The kitchen's job was to make potatoes. The carriers job was to carry the wounded, and he knows that job, he did that job, without them, we would have had even bigger losses. I believe that without the liaison department, the Battle of Koshare would have ended differently. I'm not saying that we would have lost, the outcome would not be what it is, maybe we would have had more martyrs, we would have places where we were more vulnerable where they could have hit us, which we found in time. Everybody had their own role to play that battle how it was. And when I came back to England...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: I'm curious to know those first moments when you heard big news, I suppose it was a very important news when the Agreement was signed.

Fisnik Ismaili: The last three days of war, my uncle was wounded sometime ten days before, before the end of the war, maybe longer. Correlating again, in the meantime, my parents left Pristina and ended up at my sister's in Italy (laughs), I'm telling you, Vali, my sister in Italy is like this... And time, after some time, a journalist would come to interview us, and I was one of the few who could speak English, and I would charm the journalist, and they were happy someone could speak English, and when I would tell them I studied in London, they would feel sorry for me, they would say, "Use my satellite phone."

Most of them had satellite phones, so I would call them time after time, talk to Laura in London, to my son, my sister in Italy. And nothing, I found out they were in Italy, when my [maternal] uncle got wounded, I told them, "This and this, he is wounded, in Tirana." And my mother goes from Italy to Tirana to her brother, and I found out she is going, so I asked for permission to go to Tirana for two days, three. Because beforehand, they had to send me on duty to Tirana to take some equipment, they sent us a laptop from England, for me and Gani, my friends in London got their money together and sent us the laptop. I am telling you we were high-tech, laptop, scanner, digital camera. We started multiplying maps, tell NATO Serbia's positions and stuff, all of that happened in our office. A lot of things happened there. In the beginning, it was just a liaison, then it became spying, charging batteries, farm, anything electronic you need you would find there, we started taking pictures of everything, give it to the spotters, they knew, they took pictures, we would process the information, we would take it to NATO. Everything happened there, it became very high-tech.

Part Five

Fisnik Ismaili:... And, now I forgot again why I started. I think I'm talking a lot and my thoughts are getting lost.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: You went to Tirana...

Fisnik Ismaili: Eh, yes. I went to Tirana to get that laptop and I said to Anton, "Can you take me back, I want to go and see my mother." And Gani had gone to Sahon, in Pashtrik, to fix their interconnections because they started the attack to take back the border, now as long as he was in Pashtrik. I was in command, because I was the oldest of his soldiers, and Anton said, "You can go when Gani comes

back.” Gani was there for a few days, until he came back, we didn’t know the war was ending, but it was June 7-8, and then Anton said, “Okay,” he said, “You can go now.” Actually, on the release paper they give you is written, “Soldier, dash,” they would write the name Fisnik Ismaili and he writes Fisnik Ismaili and crosses it over *frrc* {onomatopoeia} and writes, “Superior.” I have it, superior, and he says, “Look!” I said, “What, you’re making me a commander?” He said, “When you come back,” he said, “We’ll make it official.” And I went, I thought I became a superior, commander. (laughs)

And I went to Tirana, I met with my mother, we stayed for two days, on the third day, the war was over. We were in the middle of Tirana *uaaaaa* {onomatopoeia}, going crazy. And after the commanders came down from Koshare, I said, “Do I stay two more days?” He said, “Stay.” There was nothing more there. In the meantime, Aziz was killed, on June 12, I took it very hard because he was my friend. And I had those dog tags, I took them to engrave them in Tirana on the days I was there. And they were left to me in his name, then I found his family, and they had found out, I found his family...

Then I stayed for three-four days after the war in Tirana, but it was a very sad period of time. His wife had given birth while he was at war, so he didn’t see his own child. His wife was pregnant when he came to war, and she gave birth, he didn’t see his child. Father of four children. He was a very good friend, and I’m still in contact with his family a lot, a lot, a lot because I took that loss very hard, because it happened at the end, and for no reason... I mean no need, no... you know, you hold on up till the end and then for a... I’m not saying negligence, we knew they’re going to shoot, we knew because we said, “Now Serbia won’t go without letting everything they have against us out.”

We even got the order to get out of the house, before going to Tirana, they said, “Get out of the house, go stay in tents in the mountain, stay a few days.” They were too lazy to go to the mountain, there were 15-20 people there and this happened. The yard was full of people when that happened but only was... there was only one victim. Nothing, I stayed with my mother then, when I came back, the superior thing was forgotten, and I never mentioned it to Anton until a few days ago, there’s nothing, war is over. Who needs to be a commander? Then I stayed in Pristina for about two-three weeks because you come back after, actually more, I was here till July 2... Coming back after eight years.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: So you never came back during those eight years...

Fisnik Ismaili: No.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: How was it?

Fisnik Ismaili: Well you come back as a liberator, I don’t know, it’s, wow... I don’t know... I came to Pristina full of energy, everything was dead here, you know, people were scared, they stayed inside. I went to my friends or neighbors, I would call them, they were scared to come to the door, I would get on their balcony, “Oo it’s me *bre*.” At some point, I started teasing them, speaking in Serbian (laughs), things like this. The happiness of seeing those people, memories coming back, it was an indescribable pride. Then it was all.. That was a phenomenal feeling how on July 2, which was the anniversary of the declaration of independence, that day whoever was in Pristina went out spontaneously, whoever was

in Pristina went out to the street, there were so many people. You had KFOR's jeeps with seven-eight people in them. I have pictures that I took, seven-eight people being happy.

You had exalted people beyond imagination, that's the day they removed the Vuk Karadžić statue at the Philological University, they removed the statue of Njegoš. I pushed them to remove Cyrillic all over the city. There was no more Cyrillic in Pristina, within that day, "Obruča" that was at the "Mother Theresa" in Cyrillic, they broke them, they broke them all, PTK, all the Serbian writing was gone within the day. But the way it happened, there were so many people, there were no police to keep order, and not go... There were no incidents.

One fired a rifle towards the sky, British KFOR and killed an Albanian. But no other incidents, say they broke a shop and stole or did something, at all. I was amazed how people took care of Pristina, Bankkos was all in Cyrillic, and they made sure to remove only the Cyrillic, *ck, ck, ck* {onomatopoeia} from everything. July 2, 1999, I actually pushed them, "Look, look there's Cyrillic," they went like *oooo* {onomatopoeia} would go for it, "Look, look, look." And they removed all of them because a lot of them were imposed, those kinds of writings that were imposed, they forced us to put them there, they did things... Njegoš, you recall pointing the finger at the Library, they erected that one on purpose, not to say that the land is theirs but to annoy us. You know, to annoy us.

I remember the scene because they tore it down and he was left with that finger pointing {shows with his hands}. The scene in which the finger was cut because they were beating the sculpture with a bat *dang, dang, dang, dang, dang, dang* {onomatopoeia} {shows with his hands how they broke it}. Then, "I can't cut it." They would lift it up again *uuuuuu* {onomatopoeia}. With a pole *dang, dang, dang, dang, dang*, they would not stop hitting *iiiiiiiiii, dang, dang, dang, dang*, at some point, *tap* {onomatopoeia} it collapsed.

Then the other scene, I have pictures of these moments. The other scene was Vuk Karadžić, the statue of Vuk Karadžić that portrayed him sitting in front of the Philological Faculty, they had tied it behind a tractor and were dragging it through the pedestrian street on the direction of the *otpad*, to the landfill. And they were dragging it, *gzhhhh* {onomatopoeia}, it scratched the asphalt. The statue had become all white because of the spit and sputum, because everyone had spit on it, and the spit had dried (laughs). And there was one person running after it, he had taken one of his slippers off and was hitting the bronze sculpture, *dang, dang, dang, dang* {onomatopoeia} {shows with his hands}, he wouldn't stop. The other man, "Give me the other slipper." He forced him to take off the other slipper as well and he did so. They kept beating the sculpture *dang, dang, dang, dang* with slippers. I even have the pictures. (laughs)

It was, I don't know, I died laughing in the evening, that as a night, that filled my soul very much, and we died laughing at some things, and we were very happy, and you were surprised how Albanians controlled themselves, not lose control and just wipe the whole city as they could that day. And that's when you understand, wait, when we want, we can be very civilized. Because you see in places where there is police control, if they go out in America, in Los Angeles, that they went out, the things that happened then, the police killing that African-American, if there's a little anarchy, they tear the whole city down. Here, as I said, there was no control. KFOR had some soldiers who went around more

hugging with Albanians rather than trying to keep order. We took care of the city. And it is interesting, I will never forget that day. It never happened again, I don't know that anything like that happened again.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Then, you went back to London...

Fisnik Ismaili: Yes, well, then I wanted to stay longer (laughs). I was like, "I will be back one day, I will be back." Then one day, Laura calls and says, "Hey," she said, "Are you planning on coming back," she said, "The people at the office said the war is over." "When is Fis coming back to the office?" They really needed me, they had taken a few projects. And then, I hopped on a plane and came back. But at the same time, I was very disappointed with Albanians. I was disappointed because I found out a lot of things that happened between Albanians in the KLA, I was disappointed with my friends, in Pristina, mainly how they dealt with the KLA and the relations they had with the KLA. And I was mad at the KLA, how they were abusing and conquering everywhere, they were ruining all those contributions I made.

I didn't come back to fight so that I could steal apartments. Some people knocked on our door, they wanted to come in and kick my parents out. Because they bought the apartment from Serbs before the war, a 31st in Ulpianë. They lived there before the war, years before the war. Somebody found out Serbs were living there, knocking on the door, "Get out!" They were like, "Calm down, this is our apartment." "No, a Serb lives here." "He used to, we bought the apartment". "No, you occupied a Serb's apartment, get out! It's ours." Until I got to the door, "Who are you?" "Who are you? Where were you..." "We were with the KLA" "Which part of the KLA where you in?" And they went somewhere. I didn't understand who or what they were. But I know I was disappointed with all those arguments and misunderstandings between Albanians and the ingratitude between each other. And the townees never cared about the KLA, so the KLA, in a way, from the rancor, ignored the townees, repaid in this way, destroying the city.

I am not going to even talk about the ones in Albania. Albania in '99 was a wild west. They stayed there, if you had seen them in Bajram Curri, they stayed at coffee shops in Bajram Curri, rifles here, making conversation with their rifles on the lap as if it's part of the body. After '97, in the '97 riots, everyone was armed, especially in the North. In the North, you had ones with masks that stopped trucks with arms which came to Koshare, then they robbed the truck and tried to sell the arms, you know, this stuff made me disappointed in Albanians. When I went back to England, I said, "I never want to have anything to do with Albanians, never! Seriously!" Because I could have been dealing with stuff in England, organizations and gatherings, trying to get the Albanian community together, I wasted a lot of time with these things, but I never learned from it.

And I came back and said, "I am only going to look after myself," excuse my language, "Look after my own ass." And that's what I did, I started dealing with myself and that helped very much with my career. I advanced a lot, that's when the dot-com boom happened, websites had started to launch, Amazon, Google, they started developing during that time. And then, you know, I had work. I worked as a web designer back then, I did these kinds of projects. But then there was a 2001 crisis when that dot-com bubble exploded and many lost their jobs, and there was an economic crisis in London, which I survived, I didn't lose my job, but it wasn't easy.

September 11th, we started a company with a Londoner, an American, a Spanish and a Greek. We started a company where we wanted to make a boom on the internet by taking projects in England, finding cheap companies in India and in other places, completing them, supervising, and that's where the profit was, the profit was big. We were very near to closing two projects, five million each. Anyways a company, the American had had success before and he led us. We opened an office in Monaco, we had to start going to France and living in Nice. Two of them moved, life moved on, I was earning. I went, Laura got pregnant with Petrit in 2000, in 2001. I went to America, a cousin of mine was getting married, I went for three days to stay at my cousin's, she was pregnant, couldn't come with me, I had money to buy her a car. Financially I was doing very well. Then we started gradually developing this company of ours, we got ready to move to Nice.

Petriti was born on September 3rd, 2011. On September 11th, 2001, I took him to the Municipality to register him, meaning in England, during the day, in the afternoon, until I got back home, when I got back home, turned on the TV, the Twin Towers were burning. The attack on the Twin Towers in America affected London's economy so much that the two five-million contracts we had signed got canceled. Companies started laying people off, doing salary freezes and employment freezes, meaning we don't hire new people, we don't give raises, but whatever we suffer, you others are going to compensate with work. Meaning whoever still had the job had to work double or triple more. On the other hand, whoever lost the job had it bad because they lost their job, on the other side, we had to close down the company since the contracts didn't happen.

You know, from one moment where we were so close to becoming millionaires (explains with gestures), we ended up without a job. There I saw a sort of insecurity, in the sense that an Arab knocks down two towers in America and you end up losing your job in London. The global economy is so linked that only in Pristina it left no mark. And then I said, maybe it's time to go back to Pristina, you are your own boss, as much as you work, you know, everything depends on your work, it doesn't depend on someone else to get it closed down. Even though I was wrong, because here your business depends on whether a politician likes you or not, if they want to put you down they will, and I am a living cause, living proof which has been put down many times, gotten up, because I am telling you, no one has an anger like mine.

And what happened, happened, I saw that that safety in England, the experience I gained was really good. The desire to come here started to come back again. A friend of mine, Bresta, bought the rights from Marvel to publish Spider-Man, the comic book, in Albanian. And I said, "Get up, let's start something!" We began with Rrota, with Rrota we published, everything we had saved we put it into publishing comic books in Albanian. At last, with the stuff I grew up with, I said I am going back, we're bringing back that comic book culture in Albanian. We published seven numbers, we bankrupted, after I came back in 2003.

And (laughs), I have a tattoo with the Spider-Man logo, a spider, as a mark that I am coming back to Kosovo to do something good, and now it reminds me of the failure we had. But my coming back started with a good intention to do something good for this society and to do something my heart always wanted. The love for comic books was so long ago and the desire to turn them into Albanian,

to see them published was so big that I made the decision to come back for this to do something and it failed.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Did you go back with your entire family?

Fisnik Ismaili: Initially I came back alone, Laura stayed back about four months until I settled things. Then she came. During that time, she started working as a DNA analyst, meaning she was working in those CSI laboratories, you take her to a strand of hair and she pulls out the DNA from the strand of hair or spit. They were working for the police. The Department of Forensics started developing and they wanted to make that kind of laboratory. They found out that Laura was doing this job, she started working for the police, imagine in forensics, which didn't happen, the laboratory I don't know, for two years... no one talked about it, but it didn't come. On the other hand, we were working in some other jobs, in which she got a 150-euro salary, which was humiliating, because her salary was lower than the policeman's who finished the military academy, whereas she had a degree from University College London, UCL is the third-most famous university in England.

On the other hand, my business failed and I started dealing with web design and with Rrota then we parted and I started Karrota in 2005, we weren't good financially. Plus the fact that life in Kosovo wasn't that easy in the sense that if you want to do it yourself, it's very hard, and if you work for someone because it's even harder, because with a salary of 150 euros, you can't do anything. I was busy all the time and for banal reasons, but Laura couldn't do it, she tried two-three times, she stayed for more than two years, but she couldn't, you know? And she had 43 family members there, I only had a sister, who I saw once in seven months, you know. But aside from that, my persistence that, "I came here despite all of the struggles, there's no Albanian who can get me out of here again." Someone else made me leave in '91, but I won't give that pleasure to Albanians. Because after my engagement in politics and the attempts to hit me in every way, that was their biggest wish, to get me out of here. I won't give that pleasure to anyone, I am very headstrong about this.

Up to that point when she said, "I'm going!" I said, "I'm not coming!" And we haven't been together for fifteen years. So sometimes my persistence sometimes goes to the extreme, and it cost me. It cost me my family this time. But on the other side, I think I was in England, what? Maybe I would have had a good job, I can always have a good job in England, I know that. But could I have done the things I've done in Kosovo? I doubt it! Could I have made a monument of independence and experience the independence and be part of that? I doubt it! And all the, I said I live life with no regrets. Except playing the piano and forgetting [Russian] language, for the others, it was enough, I was old enough to know what I'm doing. Because I quit the piano and language when I was very young, I didn't know what I was doing. Now I did everything consciously, even if they cost me.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: The monument of independence...

Fisnik Ismaili: In the meantime, before the monument of independence, that separation wasn't easy for me, in 2005, at that time I started Karrota simultaneously, I was financially bad, at the same time, I started the office in Tirana. We found investments, we went into debt, we wanted to start big, we

wanted to work and it wasn't at all easy. So apart of my emotional state, I had to work all the time, travel to Macedonia all the time, 380 kilometers twice a week.

Up to 2010 I had the company, a little before the highway opened, I sold it. This is how I make it hard for myself, then, when it gets easier, it doesn't seem interesting to me. And work was flowing, we got some cute projects, we did some work, we changed Vala's image, we prepared Vala so that, when IPKO comes, they wouldn't fall on their knees. Do you remember how the services of Vala were in 2005? They were so horrible that 80 percent of people declared that when the other operator starts, they would change it. But we made such a good campaign and we changed its image, we made that butterfly, and we saved the integrity that the company had lost.

And we started getting popular in this field, especially in telecom, in Albania, we made advertisements for AMC, Raiffeisen, Credins Bank, Lufthansa, British Airways. And that experience I had from England, I started getting it out again, it peaked, we worked for 16, 20 hours and it peaked with NEWBORN, it was an idea of which we thought around 19 days before the declaration of independence. We went into a meeting. Jeton was insisting, he was the artistic director, he was insisting, "Let's have a meeting and talk about a project." Because the World Cup was around those days, and we wanted to do something about football, we did it later, with some penalties to shoot, a game you can play on the website.

We were talking, "Let's go." We wanted to create that game and sell it to clients, say, "Look what we did for the World Cup, will they take it?" And as we were talking, I said, "There must be something else we can sell because waiting till June..." What else is there, what else? Saint Valentine's, February 14, too early. What? "It's being talked about that independence will be declared on the 17th..." "It is being talked about!" "Yes, it was on the news that they are giving 1 million euros to finance this thing..." "Okay, let's do it," We said, "Let's think about something, because 1 million euros, no one can spend 1 million euros in ten days."

We even knew who is going to get the project to spend 1 million euros, it was in newspapers and everything. And I said, "There's no way to spend 1 million euros on this thing. We will organize big events and we know how many people will go, how fast you can organize something, how much money we will spend. If we have a good idea, we will present it, there's a budget. Let's think something *big vum, bam, vum bam* {onomatopoeia}". I came up with the word NEWBORN and it was stuck in my head, NEWBORN, NEWBORN, "What to do with NEWBORN? Should we do t-shirts?"

We were thinking to have people with pacifiers, with pacifiers in their mouths, we came up with all sorts of things, t-shirts, we'll draw on a wall, this... at one point, I said, "No, man. Something that stays that doesn't go away." "Like what?" "A typographical sculpture." "How so, we never did a typographical sculpture, we don't know how to do it, or..." "We will make a big one!" "How big?" "Two meters and a half." "Two meters and a half?" I lift my hand, and I am close to two and... I said, "Nah, I can touch the end of it. We'll make it three metres." These kind of decisions. We calculated it, three meters was twenty-five meters long. Where to place it, let's draft it as a concept idea. I said, "Only at Boro and Ramiz! We can fit it there, and enough space to take pictures. All foreign journalists will see it from the Grand. It has space for crowds."

It made sense there. We thought we would put it there temporarily, then we'll see. That spot made sense, there was no other space in Pristina you could put an object with those dimensions. And then Nita, Nita topped it off. We threw a party at the stairs, and we put a big letter there, we made people write their impressions about us, and everytime we went up the stairs, we had that letter there and we read the writings, there was what... what the guests wrote about us. And Nita comes in and says, "Let's make people sign the NEWBORN." "Ooo," I said, "The perfect idea!" Because we wanted to leave it like that. And that was the cherry on top, Nita Salihu, no sorry, Nita Salihu is... she worked as a designer here. In the meantime, I met Nita in 2007, I live with her now.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Nita, your partner.

Fisnik Ismaili: Yes. I met her in 2007. My Nita, Nita Qena was one of the people who pushed me, you know, to create NEWBORN, you know, I couldn't have done it without her. Because I didn't even sleep those eleven days, I would wake up, forget my keys, my jacket, I would forget to wear my sneakers, and Nita was there to remind me what to do. She would remind me that this has to be done, in moments when even my staff and my former partner didn't believe it was going to happen, she would say, "Come on, let's work now." And she supported me a lot. Nita Salihu put the cherry on top with the idea of signing it, and it was phenomenal as an idea, but nobody picked up the phone to hear our idea, no one was paying attention to us. Then I went to Faik Spahiu and Jeta Xharra, and I told them what I want to do, they went crazy, "Aaa what a good idea!" Another company came forth who wanted to finance us, saying, you know, if the government won't give the money, we will, just to leave it there.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Privately.

Fisnik Ismaili: Yes. Then with Jeta Xharra, what should we, how to make people, to put them in front of a done deal, so they give you permission. Because now I need permission from the Municipality, a permit of you know, "Yes, it's okay." So it would become official from the government that the heads of the government would sign, then the people, those people who would sign in the Assembly, come and sign NEWBORN and then the rest of the people to sign it. That was the idea, for NEWBORN to become official as an object, otherwise, if it wasn't official, I would just drop it there, *qklup* {onomatopoeia} a night before, leave it there and nothing, just go. That's how I planned on doing it.

What I started this, I went to the guys who work with iron, "How much does it cost?" "18 thousand euros," he said, "to make NEWBORN." I said, "I'll give you 20, just start." He said, "Okay, give me 2,000 as a deposit." I didn't have any money. I said, "Here, my house key. My apartment key." "No," he said, "What kind of car do you drive?" I had a Pasat. He said, "Look at the cars I have." He had some Mercedes cars," I said, "Look at the cars you have, do you need my 2,000 euros?" "No," he said, "As a deposit!" I couldn't find any person I had in common with him who could guarantee him and tell him, "Start working!" because I had money. And the work had to start that night so NEWBORN could be finished on time, because if it started later, it could not be finished on time.

And I said, "Start working and a person who guarantees..." and I couldn't find anyone. I told my mother, "Aii I'm trying..." my mother went over to our neighbour Drita, and while talking to her she said, "Fisi went to Fushë Kosovë found a guy, but he isn't starting so he's trying.." I asked her, "Do you

him, do you know her, you know, people who guarantee for me. He didn't know me, didn't know who I was."

While my mother was talking to Drita, she says, "Yes..." she said, "My brother is best friends with his son," my mother calls me, "I found someone, he will start working." His friend called him and said, "Start working, do you know who he is?" And they started working. Then I had a problem with them because, when they saw the greatness of the object, they didn't want the money anymore, they wanted merits. When I sent CNN, BBC went to their workplace, they recorded the workplace, when I sent... on the other hand, I was asking for money from the government, they weren't paying attention to me, they didn't pick up the phone or anything.

And they saw it through a channel that went to the Americans and when they saw it, they said, "Look what a great idea, take it, yes." You know, they accepted it. The costs were around 66 thousand euros, 20 thousand just to build it, aii, just the balloons, two thousand balloons, two, three euros each with helium, balloons that would normally cost 50 cents, when they found out it is about independence, celebrating independence, they knew they gave 1 million euros, they didn't care, it would be twice or thrice the price, and everything cost more.

And in the end, they accepted it like that, then I had problems with the ones who built it, they didn't want put it up the last night, we said, "I won't put it up without my logos," I would say, "You came here with a piece of paper, you came here with a piece of paper, we built it. Do we have a contract? You are creating my idea." "But..." "You just had a piece of paper," you know, "you made the iron. And you put a price for this iron, and you put a price for making it." But when they saw how big it got, because in the beginning, nobody understood, not even my staff, "What are you doing...", they would say, "It's not going to work." My staff..

A night before it happened we were crawling up the walls. There were some who believed but there were some... My partner told me, "You don't have my support, it isn't going to work out." But I said the rancor that I have, the persistence... at that time, I actually met, I met Nita's parents at that time. Because, when I got into a relationship with Nita, they all said, "He is separated." At that time, it was a big deal, you, he is separated and he is looking at someone who is nine years younger than him.

And, and Nita had pressure from her family, so how are you hanging out with him, and while I was building NEWBORN I get the chance to meet them and now... NEWBORN was created with such love giving that kind of feeling to all the people, and they forgot all my sins, I'm calling them sins, the separation was forgotten and even... And I remember when Nita's mother met me, she said to Nita, because she saw that I was not stopping, I wanted to make NEWBORN by any means, "Fis is very headstrong." I said, "Tell her I'm persistent, not headstrong, he is persistent and doesn't stop until he tried until the end." (laughs)

And nothing, when it got accepted, they made me change the colors because the idea was to make it red, national symbol, red, and sign it in black, that made sense. I had no idea how the flag will look, I didn't even know the colors, zero...

Part Six

Fisnik Ismaili: When they called, when the people from the government called me to tell me that the project was accepted, they said, “We only have one request, to make it yellow or blue.” I said, “Yellow or blue, EU’s colors, EU pushed for this to happen, fine, it’s an easy compromise.” And I said, “Okay, I’ll make it yellow,” it looked better than the blue, when I saw the flag. I almost died. They tricked me, I was so mad because they could have told me.

The worst is that, three or four days before the declaration of independence, there was a competition for the flag, there were three finalists, I don’t know if you know, one of them was my [maternal] uncle’s, the painter, and they called my uncle, said, “You are one of the three finalists, we will let you know if you win or not.” At the end, when the flag came out, it wasn’t none of those three. They were supposed to get an amount of money, the three finalists, and they never called them again, they were forgotten and that was done from the corner.

I don’t know the details, I just know that after that I had a bad experience because maybe the cheapest part of the whole celebration of independence was those 66 thousand of NEWBORN, which they started complaining about, and people started calling me, asking for that money, do you understand, and I didn’t have it, 66 thousand euros is a lot. Today they say, “You had a tender with Hashim, Hashim gave you a tender, that’s why.” NEWBORN was cheaper than the overpass at the hospital that cost 120 thousand euros, now take into consideration that it doesn’t have a price today, they didn’t even want to give me those.

I had a meeting with Hashim Thaçi when I threatened that I will write about it in newspapers, he called me to threaten me, “You can’t...” what did he say, “Even if you wanted to...” he said, “You can’t make this a big deal.” I just wanted to know if he is paying me or not, and if he isn’t going to pay to start finding the money to pay people by myself, you know? And I had a bad experience with him that day because he accused me of inflating prices.

“I told you a helium balloon cost three times more, they sold everything more expensive and the last thing I would do is steal from the monument of independence.” The moment he said that, I erased Hashim Thaçi, I knew his doings from ‘99 but at that moment, when I experienced it myself, I saw from the first meeting that I was done with Hashim Thaçi, I erased him as person that exists in my life or that I consider him as a human being. And maybe that played a role with my persistence that I got into politics later, in 2010 I got into politics.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Before getting there, do you remember when NEWBORN was launched?

Fisnik Ismaili: Of course.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: How was that for you?

Fisnik Ismaili: We were busy with the choreography of that moment. First they told me 6:30, two days earlier, they told to be there and get ready at 6:30. They were late. We made a choreography for how

we're going to lift it, first we covered it with a sheet, the sheet was very heavy, plus it had snowed, it made it even heavier, even if we wanted to, we could have never, we didn't even try, we didn't know how are we going to do it. But then as we were filling it with helium balloons that day, at some point, it was a little windy and the sheet flew up a little, and it flew up so easily, we said, "Okay, the balloons are going to make this easier." And we fixed it, we filled it with balloons, we tied them well so when the moment comes to open it.

On the other side, everybody had their duties, the song which you can't hear but the song "Feeling Good" by Nina Simone is, and we have this rhythm *tan tuhrum tuhrum* {onomatopoeia}, and the lights go on, one after the other *tam, taram* {onomatopoeia} {shows with his hands}, but no one noticed because it was that messy, so messy that you could not notice details, but we also thought of them. Now Nita was trying to listen to the song and to turn the lights on *tam tuhrum*, but no, we had the best sound system available, but we could not imagine that so many people will be there, that will hush the music. There were these kinds of little exceptions that we didn't count, do you understand, because we didn't expect that many people.

For me, it was, I don't know, often man tries to ask oneself "What's my life mission?" you know, something that, when you accomplish it, you die because you achieved it. Then I even said, this is it probably I am closing my chapter contributing here. I fought the war and for independence, I did this. I thought, "Tomorrow I won't wake up," you know, that's what I thought sometimes it seemed bigger than life, I can't explain what kind of feeling it was, that's how it seemed to me.

And when those flew, because when it opened, there is a moment when it gets stuck in a corner of one of the letters, while it was opening... But I'm saying to my mother, with Drita, with his brother and everything is... We often say to Nita, the invisible hand, it's that invisible hand that opens doors for me, I don't know how. It got stuck in one corner, that corner could have been stuck in each letter, those 25 meters, no one could have removed it. That corner gets stuck over my head, I just put my hand up, *tak*, it could have been stuck somewhere else and until I would run, all the balloons would fly in the wrong way and [audio doesn't work] that corner is over my head, I am saying, things happen to me that doors open... Me and Nita often say the invisible hand, it just opened doors for me, we just see it happened. That was something in the moment, over my head and I just removed it and it wasn't noticeable, when you look at the recordings, you can't notice it, you see me jumping a little, it could have happened anywhere else, without any practice it went perfectly.

That's nothing, when we started winning awards, *kuku*. The first award was the Silver Clio Award in Miami, we won... because you apply for awards in different festivals and then they assess it, it is extremely hard to win, and really just the best work in the world get awarded. And I had a feeling that we had a shot. I usually get up late and go to work last. Until I wake, until I go to the bathroom..

I was sitting on my toilet when I started getting some SMSs, SMSs from work, I hear the phone on my table *pit, pit, pit, pit* {onomatopoeia}. I got out of the bathroom, I had 15 SMSs on my phone, I open them, the whole staff, "Congratulations, congratulations man, congratulations, congratulations, congratulations," I thought, "Congratulations for what..." I call them, "What happened?" They said, "We won Clio." "What do you mean we won Clio?" "We got the letter." "What letter?" They don't tell, it

isn't like Oscars to not know until the last moment, but you find out a day earlier, not a month and a half earlier.

The festival wasn't going to be held for another two months. But they sent the letter knowing that we need visas, they sent the letter and said, "Don't say that you won, and whoever wants to come you have this, like a warranty, like a reason for the visas." They said, "We won, look at the letter." "What letter..." I said, "Give the letter to Besi,," I knew Besi didn't speak English, I said, "Give the letter to Besi so he can read it," I didn't believe them because we tease each other like this, we have fun, I thought they were teasing me.

Besi starts, "Congratulations.." He was reading it, I was crying, sitting on my toilet. Nita comes in, "What happened, what happened? When she sees me crying, "What happened? What happened?" Until she found out, she started crying out of fear. When I got out of the bathroom and explained to her what happened, she was crying out of happiness. At that moment, comes in... My father lived in the neighborhood and he knew that sometimes I don't wake up on time, and he comes in to see if I woke up to go to work. Because I always wake up at 9:30, until I get ready, I get to the office at 10:30.

He comes in and sees us both crying and says, "Sorry!" He thought we were fighting and, "Sorry!" And he gets out of the house, you know, he felt bad that he interrupted us... why we're crying, I started going after him, *alalal blaaa* {onomatopoeia} until I explained to him what... But, as I said, my father, even in his old age, and when I won the Golden Lion, he still couldn't understand my profession, which he opposed his whole life, why didn't I become an accountant, why didn't I become an accountant, you know. And then he saw it, I would say, "You wanted me to achieve something, but I didn't do it in the field you wanted me to, I did it in the field I wanted to, there's nothing higher than this." "Is there money in it?" (laughs) He always found a reason why it wasn't good.

Actually later I understood that he did that to me, then my sister told me how he reacted. Because, when I gave the first speech at the Assembly, he was watching, you know, when I came back home, I said, "How was it?" He said, "You could have done better." My speech at the Assembly, "Say something nice about me once in your life." We ended up fighting for about an hour and a half, and at some point I told him, "Bye!" My sister calls me, "You dummy..." she said, "Don't you know how he is, he will never admit it to you. I was there when you spoke, he started crying. Do you understand?"

And he died doing that to me. But that pushed me, I said that I am very, very, I don't want to say headstring, but persistent when I want to do something. And like this, we went to Miami, we went there for five days, I can't even explain how the feeling of winning that award was like. But that was nothing when the Golden Lion, which is the highest award, calls you and a day before you spend all your money in Miami, you got a 5000 euro loan, and you spend all the money there.. Because you were like, "Okay, we won in Miami, no other way you will win anything else, the Golden Lion in Cannes, no, this one in Miami was luck."

When I was in Albania at the office, they said, "We called to tell you that tomorrow at 6:30..." It was 6:30 Tuesday evening, they said, "You have to get the award tomorrow at 6:30 PM." "What award?" They said, "Well, the Lion." I said, "Can I know what kind of Lion did we win?" We knew we were on the shortlist, because the shortlist gets nominated a day earlier, but there are around 150 nominations,

and only a third of them wins something. I said, “What did we win?” He said, “Golden.” (groans) “Okay,” I was acting like, “I don’t know if I can come get it tomorrow, I’ll send someone to get it.” You know?

They said, “Okay, just tell us beforehand so we know who comes.” You know? “Okay.” I was talking in a cold way, like nothing. When I hung up, what a dream, how to go at 6:30 to Cannes, I didn’t have money or anything. And everybody found out, then the whole network found out, because then we were connected with a global network of agencies. People were writing to me from everywhere. That’s when I understood what I had won. They started saying, “You have to by any means!” But how would I get to Cannes. Until we found a friend who had a tourism agency and opened the agency for us to buy a ticket so I would leave the next day at 5:00 in the morning, to arrive in Nice at 8:00, to arrive in Cannes at 11:00, to get ready for the ceremony at 18:30. And after all those struggles I realized when I arrived in Cannes, I had forgotten my shoes. I had to wear a suit, I forgot the shoes.

How can you find shoes size 48 in a small town like Cannes. I had half a day to visit the city, smile and... I spent that half-day going through stores to find a pair of shoes. Finally I found the ugliest shoes I have ever bought in my life, but they were the only ones size 48 in the city. And I went to the ceremony. I went to the ceremony then I saw people getting their awards in Japanese kimono, they wore kimono, and some other from Brazil had shorts and sneakers, they didn’t even bother about it. And I was trying to follow procedures (laughs).

But anyway, that’s it in short, but I wanna tell how big it was when we unveiled NEWBORN, the awards were, personally for me, like an emotional confirmation of all this hard work that someone is finally appreciating it. Because our profession is so underrated in Albania, it’s sad, it physically hurts when you see people underrate your work.

Even NEWBORN, “Aii they’re just letters there.” Yes, it’s true, I won the highest award for design and what is actually NEWBORN? You open Word, touch Caps Lock, you write NEWBORN, change the color and font. There’s no design. You win the highest award for design in the world, explain it to me, you know? da Vinci has said simplicity is the, art sophistication, the, simplicity is the last sophistication, when you can simplify it in a way that it gives a message, that will emotionally shake many people.

It has to be a brilliant idea, it has to be the moment, know how to seize it and the way you do it. And when it is appreciated around the world, it is indescribable, and every time I think about it, it had been 10 years and my eyes still fill with tears and I get goosebumps, and I still have the will to win one more. Because when you win one, you want the adrenaline for the next one, it’s... everybody wins one Oscar, but only the best win two-three, you know. There’s Tom Hanks, and DeNiro, how many did DeNiro get? He got two or three Oscars, but Pacino barely got one, you know, DiCaprio one, Meryl Streep one, you know. So, you have people who have Golden Lions, I know people who have won 30-40 Golden Lions, you know, but they are the geniuses of that field.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: How did you think that you will get involved so intensely in politics after all of this? Because what you told me until now doesn’t, it is intuitively difficult to believe that then you will engage so intensively in politics.

Fisnik Ismaili: Look at it as a business, as a business, as an agency, my advertisement... Maybe Karrota was the only one that did not get involved with any political party. Now the moment you get involved with a political party, you will do favors. You do their campaign, they get in power, they give you tenders and you dive in. And I didn't want to associate with any of them. I was the most apolitical person ever. In 2004, I designed the website for the Assembly of Kosovo, and while I was working on that project that lasted for two months, I had a dream that I became a parliament member, and I was walking by *Pisha*, wearing a tie, and I woke up sweating, terrified. It was horrible just thinking I might ever be, let alone wearing a tie, I have never worn a tie in my life, just after losing 60 kilograms, I started wearing them, because I started liking myself more apparently, because I never wore ties.

Our business suffered this, not involving, staying out of politics. Because you're not favored, and it's hard with a fair competition... Because what agencies do is, when someone asks for a campaign, there go to four or five agencies and give their ideas, the best one wins, but the best only wins in the private sector where people want what's best for their company. Forget about winning public tenders, forget about winning anything else anywhere... or with foreign organizations where Albanians work, forget about winning anything if you don't have connections, and giving something.

And I tried to keep my business alive without doing those things, which was very hard. And I saw that it was just getting harder, and after that bad experience with Hashim, where, even though he called me a thief, I took it... my dissatisfaction in this whole business environment was growing for years but that peaked it, and it became a little personal. And I started on Facebook, I started talking on Facebook in 2008-2009, people started knowing me from Facebook, I don't know if you remember that period of time, they knew me from Facebook, "Fis who is teasing them." Then I would write something on Facebook and the Tax Administration would come to remind me, "You know, they didn't find anything," they would go, I would still write on Facebook, they would come again after two weeks, asking me, "How is your Facebook going?"

When I saw that I wouldn't stop, they left me alone. Work was going pretty well in 2010, but my dissatisfaction was growing, because I saw many injustices that were being done to my business and others, do you understand? I... my business was depended on private companies, now when you can't take part, now I am a public person, but earlier, now it's a conflict of interest taking public tenders, but back then, you couldn't even take part in competitions, you know, you were on the backlist, you weren't connected, when there isn't some kind of correctness, why should you have a business, why try and work. Like this and other reasons people saw, especially when I decided to tease them and they decided to revenge in other ways, this got intensified.

I would tease them on Facebook, they tried to take my clients and it escalated. And in 2010, when I heard that Shpend... I am saying, all my decision, since '91 at the station of Milan what we decided to go to London and I started there for twelve years of my life. On Thursday at work, I just got up and decided to go to war, or when I came back to Pristina, all of these are decisions like that. How we had a meeting to talk about football and NEWBORN was created, all of my biggest decisions were like this.

And one day I went and said to Shpend, "I heard that you're getting into a party." "Yes." I said, "Okay..." I said, "All I ask from you is justice, some sort of integrity in the business environment," I

said, “So there’s no cheating,” I said, “When you get power, can you promise me that, so I won’t have to make business,” I said, “Without having to find connections, be forced to hear all kinds of people asking for money, asking for bribes to win a project, which I know I can win on my merits.” He said, “If only we ever get the power.” “No...” I said, “You have the services of my company for free, you don’t need to pay me back or anything, I just want to help you win the elections, okay?”

And I started making his campaign, which was a very good campaign, taking into consideration that, in those elections, we only got two percent, but the figures that I put highest on that campaign in the next elections were parliament members, or mayors, or... so the campaign was successful. The results of the 2010 elections were results of cheating, because I am convinced we would have passed the threshold, but the organization didn’t. As for my perception, I really did well on Shpend’s campaign.

But when I went down, I am conditionally saying went down, when Shpend in a certain moment had trouble filling the candidate list, the electoral list with a candidates, 110 were scared to campaign. Shpend said to me, “Get on the list.” I said, “I have no idea about being a parliament member, or politics, or anything.” He said, “Get on the list because you created NEWBORN, people also know you from Facebook. Get on the list.” And I got onto the list. Things changed from there.

But we lost the elections there, but when we lost the elections, we noticed who was there to stay, and who was there only for interest, because we were only five or six people left and we continued. Immediately, after we got together with Vetëvendosje, all of those six actually were four of us, in the first election, Shpendi became mayor, Dardan Sejdiu received the most votes in the Assembly, I was the second, Puhia the third, four people from FER²⁰ were the most voted, there’s something there. We say that people were noticing, and I was noticing, “Wait, because I know more about this rather than some people I thought knew,” But on the other side, that wish that you can change something from the inside can push you quite far.

That wish that you can change something from the inside can push you quite far, and you try and hope that the next election, you lose, you get up again, you win something, you get up again. But I see that it is a very long process that requires a lot of patience and commitment. Now, at the same time, I have a business that I don’t want to leave aside, because this business is helping the subject, helps in different campaigns, it does good work. On the other hand, politics requires engagement, you have to balance both.

To tell you the truth, the elections weren’t the challenge, the challenges were candidating and winning. You have a battle with yourself, with rivals, because every party has their rivals of similar profile, for example, they go into elections for the first time, they’re almost the same age as you, they’re probably known as Facebook influencers, people who influence. You have some sort of rivalry with them, then also with family, like me, I tried to prove to my father that I can do something my whole life. And all of these challenges you to do something in a particular moment, I don’t know, I said I’ll stay in politics as long I see I can change something. Lately I don’t know if there is anything that I can change, maybe it’s time to leave it, or look at some other way I can make a change.

²⁰ Partia Fryma e Re was a political party in Kosovo founded by Shpend Ahmeti and Ilir Deda.

I'm not saying I haven't changed anything, if I can give any credit to myself from the beginning of engaging in politics, people in 2010 didn't dare mention some names, even in coffee shops, they were scared to talk. At least, by talking out and not being scared, I pushed a lot of people, not push them, but in a way I showed them how to find the courage and open their mouths. You feel freer when you can talk, and the other one who thinks that they have power over you doesn't let you talk, sees that you have the courage to speak up, and they leave you be. If there's one thing that has changed in this society, it is that pressure that we had from politicians who dug and threatened, it is smaller now. But they still steal, they still do all kinds of bad things, but at least you feel less threatened because you had the courage to speak up.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Was this scenario with Vetëvendosje expected?

Fisnik Ismaili: The separation scenario or the union scenario?

Kaltrina Krasniqi: The separation.

Fisnik Ismaili: Maybe after many years. Our differences were, are clear. I am more liberal than most there, they are left, and the ideological differences between me and Liburn are diametrically different. He is extremely left, I am pretty liberal, when I think about it as an example. While we were out of politics, you could go to a mountain and play sports until the time came.

But I saw the growth of Vetëvendosje as growth of a power that takes up most of the political space, then when that is cut off, it makes a left wing and a right wing, do you understand, there are two genuine wings of policymaking because it is what it is... what Vetëvendosje was, and PSD²¹ and all of them who see politics as a business, but we were making genuine politics. But on the inside, we had divisions that had to stay together until they get the biggest part of politics, and then separate and become two forces, who yes, they are political rivals but if they were human...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Would have made a more healthy separation...

Fisnik Ismaili: Yes, which shouldn't, because the moment we separated it was ruined, it wasn't healthy... The way they hit us, the way things happened, it was obvious that a healthy environment wasn't being built, not even inside the Movement. And this is the biggest worry because we should have created a healthy environment that, even when we separate, we talked about, even on the inside, we could have done it like this, we talked about when we grow, we have to separate and be the main forces, we all knew. But that it happened like this, and it got personal, that people's ego got involved, they made me not like this job anymore.

It's true that I said I'd stay because, when I went into politics, some would say, "Kosovo lost a good designer and gained a bad politician." Maybe, but again when I see myself in the Assembly, I see I can do more than some people there. But the moment that I see that I can't contribute anymore, I am not needed to change something, I leave. I have many other more important things to do anyway.

²¹ Social Democratic Party of Kosovo.

I have to see how it goes. Now some things are happening, things you don't expect always happen, you know, currents that take you somewhere else entirely, I have that kind of life that at whatever time of year, for example, it's October now, if you had asked me last October if I have any idea what I would be doing today, where will I be, I would have no idea, no, no idea, I never knew.

Last year at Karrota, we had a financial crisis that hit us hard. We had a campaign and we were lost, and I never thought, I thought the crisis would last until we get back on our feet, and I didn't know what is going to happen a year after that. A year from now, let alone that we got over that crisis, but we're also thinking of opening another business, and I'm not in the party I used to be, do you understand, extreme changes that were from last year, whenever, in whichever moment of life, when I think about earlier in my life, the connection isn't continuous at all, and Nita says, "Living with you is like a roller coaster."

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Which means there's no sense in asking you what you think to do in the future.

Fisnik Ismaili: I have absolutely no idea, no idea, at one moment, I think about opening a gym, then I think about getting a PhD degree, now I'll just see that I started on my PhD, or I started writing that book.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Fisnik, thank you very much! It was a pleasure. Thank you!

Fisnik Ismaili: I hope so, I don't know what I said.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: It was great, thank you very much.