

INTERVIEW WITH OMER ŠKRIJELJ

Janjevo | Date: June 11, 2019

Duration: 56 minutes

Present:

1. Omer Škrijelj (Speaker)
2. Erëmirë Krasniqi (Interviewer)
3. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
4. Besarta Breznica (Camera)

Symbols in transcription, nonverbal communication:

() - emotional communication

{ } - the interlocutor explains some gestures.

Other rules of transcription:

[] - addition to the text to help understand

Footnotes are add-ons that provide information about places, names or expressions.

Part One

Anita Susuri: Can you tell us a little bit about your childhood, what do you remember?

Omer Škrijelj: Well, considering that I was born in Brestovac, long ago in 1959. My childhood began in Lipjan. At the age of three I came to Lipjan because my father worked in the former militia and they, as a military force, were subject to moving around according to the command and their commanders. So then we came to Lipjan in '63. Well, we settled down there because the police was transformed into, I mean the militia was transformed into police. Everything I remember from my childhood is connected to Lipjan.

So those first, those first impressions were that it was some small place, relatively private, we knew each other well. However, from today's point of view, Lipjan was completely different back then. It was smaller and it was inhabited mostly by people who were not from Kosovo, which is very interesting, because Lipjan had a lot of mines, a lot of factories. So then, those first doctors, first teachers, they were all sent to serve their duty in Lipjan. And then they stayed with their families there. So in that aspect it was interesting, that socializing... it's like you're in the former little Yugoslavia (laughs).

And we hung out. Our fellow Albanian citizens settled relatively late in Lipjan because the personnel also arrived late. So only when the University of Pristina had fully started working in '68, '70 and slowly the infrastructure started developing, it became convenient for Albanians to live here. And they were, those first hangouts, they were connected to, to my friends, to the children of engineers back then, and doctors. We played all kinds of games, some of which you might know even today, but they are forgotten now, electronics are to blame of course. Yes, now we play alone, we don't need company (laughs).

And then when the population mixing already started, I had great friends, Albanians too. That's the reason why I speak Albanian so well, also because since I was little, I always liked to learn, I'm just like that. I like to learn new things (laughs). I liked spending time with my peers in the Albanian community and getting to know them, their language, and their culture, which I wasn't used to.

Later, that was the norm... some people praise the state from back then, others condemn it. It had some advantages, it favored unity, if nothing else at least we pretended that we were united (laughs). And then there was an exchange of experiences. I share my knowledge with my friends, and what they know, they share with me. We had these sports socializings, since the fifth, sixth grade of elementary school, I was a very active eleven-twelve year old. I was involved in some sport associations. I was the most successful in archery. I always had great results, and somewhere in high school I even became the champion of Kosovo in air guns (laughs).

That was when I met, the very famous, Sanija Hyseni. She was the representative of our youth from Kosovo and she was even honored to hand the *štafeta*¹ to Tito. She was also a very successful athlete then, she also did archery, so that was for me, let's say, like the creme of the crop in society. I often compare those sports associations to today's, you don't have that today, today people don't care as much about learning sports and would rather be good at other things. Back then practicing sports was a priority, and I liked that, in the systems of that time. So let's say, sometime at the end of elementary and the beginning of high school I started actively practicing athletics.

There I was also very successful, I competed in combined events, I have some medals at home. Back then I went to federal and state championships. And then it was like, the republic always changed. Then I went to Ohrid, and Kladovo {waves hands} and Budva, then Umag, so you walk around and you get to know that country and then also as a *ferijalac*.² You heard that the *Ferijalni Savez*³ existed, it's an organization that gathered young people who wanted to get to know the country and to travel. You didn't need a lot of money, each city had a *Ferijalni Savez*, if you can't afford a hotel, you call the *Ferijalni Savez*, you get free accommodation and food, and for young people that was a great way to socialize.

So in that way we also had a chance to get to know the country which was so big back then. I wanted to connect in that way, we had cultural exchanges. So, at that time it was normal for everyone to know at least one song from every region of the former [Yugoslavia], and we would sing everything, starting with Macedonia, Kosovo and so on, whatever people knew. And it always sounded beautiful, at least it seemed beautiful... and then my studies started. I enrolled in '78. So my first school year was in '78-'79. I finished in '84.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: This was in Pristina?

Omer Škrijelj: In Pristina, yes.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was Pristina like back then?

¹ Serbian: *štafeta*, the baton was carried in a relay of youth that crossed all of Yugoslavia on May 25, Communist leader Tito's birthday.

² A young person who travels with the help of the organization *Ferijalni Savez*.

³ Serbian: *Ferijalni Savez*, Organization that gathered youths, educated them, sent them to travel and provided food and accommodations.

Omer Škrijelj: Well, it was good. It was good, I mean it wouldn't be fair to say it wasn't good, because it was. Because we had a lot of classes with colleagues from the Albanian group and well, that was fulfilling, so let's say, even though I was in the Serbo-Croatian group, with the Serbo-Croatian language, I had Albanian professors who held classes for both groups, just like professors in Belgrade had groups both in Albanian and Serbian, so members from different universities could exchange experiences. For example, I remember Musa Haxhiu was the most eminent expert in the field of physiology, him and also Osmani, Izedin Osmani in microbiology.

So I don't know, it's also worth mentioning that back then, it wasn't an obstacle where you came from. We were in a place to really, enrich ourselves spiritually and intellectually. I finished college pretty easily, I mean easy as far as time goes because I didn't waste any time or years and I graduated in '84 and it was our task to learn but the state hired us immediately, so half of the focus was on education and half was getting into the workforce (laughs). You didn't have to hurry, just to illustrate, it was a Thursday when I graduated and on Monday I started working.

Now, that's the dream. I tell my kids now, it's like a cartoon (laughs), they can't understand it because it was actually like that. And then...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Regarding the city of Pristina, do you remember how it was being built back then?

Omer Škrijelj: Yes, there were some, I call them uniform-like communist buildings. They're not ugly, they were functional, but for today's conditions they are not very pretty. Here, you still have in Aktash up there those buildings, those red and white ones, now the facades {raises arms} are repaired. It's above the University, those blocks {shows direction} if you noticed, you'll see. There's brick, there's concrete pillars, there's balconies that resemble one another and on the outside everything looked like a box, to save space on the inside. They went for that, because let's say back then, in the system of that time a worker, after some time, had the right to an apartment from the state.

And then the apartments were ranked, from one bedroom ones, two bedroom, three bedroom ones. When you got married, you get a one bedroom apartment, you have a baby, you go to a two bedroom one and so on and then you give way to the young ones. So, we didn't own apartments as property back then, but the state gave them according to the size of the family and contribution at work. That was normal then. After graduating, I started working those mandatory years of service. I worked a bit in the community Health Center, and a bit in the clinic.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In Pristina?

Omer Škrijelj: Yes, I worked in the Health Center in Lipjan, I was assigned a residency at the clinic. You had to visit every clinic back then, to complete a part of your residency because we were general practice. So you had to know a little bit about everything. Then came our usual obligations. Us men had to serve one year in the military. However, I don't consider that as a loss personally because

during my service, the first six or seven months, I was in special education at the *VMA*,⁴ the Military Medical Academy.

So, apart from the medical, well, courses, I passed some thirteen tactical courses as a soldier, so I could become, in the structure of the military then, some sort of commandant. And okay, all that seemed pretty nice to me because from an expert point of view it was good. I was within reach of professors, eminent experts, and today *VMA* is a recognized institution. And then as a resident, like a reserve officer, I was in Ljubljana for about six months and also had great work conditions there. Even today they are ahead of us.

Sometimes you feel that regret, “Why didn’t I stay?” But we in the south preferred family over a good career (laughs) so we came back home. And the year passed.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What else do you remember from that period?

Omer Škrijelj: Well, [I remember] those ordinary military days, and again, the neighbors. There you had people from all over. Although I was already in a period which gave me a little happiness. Already those gaps between people formed, people started to divide, those years were not so good for Kosovo Albanians. When they started dying in the army, maybe you remember, maybe they told you, you’re young, it’s.... Let’s say in ‘86, when I was in the army, when I came back around ‘93 or ‘94, many young Albanian had already died in the army. They called it an accident, an accident. But if you think about it, that was a big number of accidents then.

Then you had that Kelmendi case and so for us from Kosovo it wasn’t very pleasant, there were nonstop interrogations and you had to explain you’re not part of that, nobody is bothering you, and this and that. Anyways, my focus was more on my job itself and that’s why I only have a few of these everyday anecdotes. I wanted to be more, to not be in the mainstream of the times, but a bit more *hajde* {waves hand} let people go, just don’t bother me. And anyway, I decided to, when I got back from the army, I chose this place for work because down there [Lipjan] is a bigger institution, Pristina even bigger, which will always limit people.

Considering that I am a Bosniak and not from around here, I didn’t have a big family for that sublime [In English] support, but it was better for me to remove myself because then, by those standards I had potential. I was one of the top-twelve students of my year. So for reference, Afrim Blyta, that famous Jusuf Ulaj, and Kelmend Pallaska, were all my generation. We worked together then and it was expected of me to join them, to tell you the truth (laughs).

It came as a surprise, that I stayed in the Health Center, but at least I spared myself from these conflicts. Many people who wanted to fight, got killed. The political situation wasn’t very good and that led me to Janjevo. There was a, this new building was just built in Janjevo.

⁴ Serbian: *VMA, Vojnomedicinska Akademija* - Military Medical Academy is located in Belgrade, Serbia.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What year was this?

Omer Škrijelj: '88. November 17 it was opened, it was Liberation day of Lipjan and that's when I accepted this position, and in May of '89, the year when all this was renovated, when they put things in, that's when I came to work and live there.

Anita Susuri: What was Janjevo like?

Omer Škrijelj: Well, Janjevo was interesting. Some five to six thousand Croatians and some Turks and Albanians lived there, but Roma people also. What was mainly interesting back then was, as a young man, you had friends everywhere, but here they were also respectful. Let's say, I walk up and this old man says "Mister doctor" or whatever, wait, at that time we said, "Come on comrade" this, or "Come on comrade" [refers to female] that, and suddenly I'm in a place where it's like I left the country (laughs). And also, there was more socializing than in other places. So I had the impression that all of Kosovo wanted to relax, to have fun, to come to Janjevo and have a nice time (laughs).

Because, as we say, we ate, we drank, we sang {waves hands} we partied from sunrise to sunset. So there wasn't a set working time but the authorities allowed everything to be open until the morning, there was no closing (laughs). So yeah, there was a lot of socializing in the *çarshia*.⁵ And it was a custom to like, we didn't do home visits. Like instead of me going to your house and then you coming to mine, we met in the *çarshia*. And the women visited each other. So yes, it was a little bit separate (laugh) in that way. And it was very interesting.

Anita Susuri: Where did you go the most? What coffee shops were there?

Omer Škrijelj: Well now most of them are closed. I remember, we counted once, there were nine taverns and twelve coffee places. Can you imagine? In this small place. There was so much youth that they were all full. You were never sure if you were going to have a place to sit (laughs). It was all full because there were so many people, it's normal here that one family has seven, eight, nine children. That was...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Among the Croatians?

Omer Škrijelj: Among the Croatians, yes. Because that probably comes from the catholic religion, they forbid abortions and they forbid ending pregnancies of any kind so those families were like that, with a lot of people. Which is why a small place like this had so many people. When you look at it, all of it {waves hand}, in a few steps you're in any neighborhood. You noticed, tight streets, close houses, and in every house a lot of kids. So there lived, I'm telling you, five, six thousand people.

Anita Susuri: When you came here, you already had a family or?

⁵ Turkish: *Çarshia*, literally small market, old part of Janjevo.

Omer Škrijelj: No, no. I got married there. There are two factors that brought me here, the one I said, to avoid these conflicts that were coming, that were already coming. It was that famous September then, when they expelled the Albanian personnel, Albanian personnel from every public institution. It was in the '90s and somehow I left before '89- '90. So I felt that something was not going to be good, so it would be better for me here. And the other factor was, I got married, and every young woman likes to just be with her husband. And then, why would I go to the family house when we are offered a comfortable apartment here.

So then, that's how I got here and stayed to this day, because of circumstances, because somehow since then, nothing bad has happened. There were always some conflicts, always some double crossings, some overturns. Which was good, for example, during the Balkan wars, this place disappeared, practically disappeared. Albanians themselves, they say it without inferiority complex, "Janjevo was Janjevo, while Croats were here." And today Janjevo is still Janjevo.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us more about that, what was Janjevo like when you first came? Do you remember more of that different atmosphere?

Omer Škrijelj: So, I'm saying, the atmosphere was like this, here I'll describe one day and maybe that will give you a good idea of how Janjevo was. Let's say you get up in the morning, you were never the first in the *çarshia*, there was always someone there before you. Mostly those were housewives that would do their washing on the street, usually near the entrance of their homes. Back then cobblestone was popular, but the one from Turkish times, hand placed. And it would shine in the morning sun, and the greenery {waves hand}, a lot of greenery filled it, enriched the view.

There was a lot of greenery here too, {waves hand} in the *çarshia*. Now the concrete took over because of construction and all. There was a lot, some branches even reached my balcony (laughs). And you walk out, filled with this freshness, into the *çarshia*, to have your first morning coffee, and the taverns are already full. Someone is already there. There were some workers of Metalac,⁶ workers who went to Pristina. The bus leaves at 6:30 AM from here, so it was like this {crowded} around 6:00. That's when I liked to go out, when it was six o'clock, when everyone was there. There was always something happening, we would joke around a little and then everybody went on their way. I opened my office and the patients knew, I didn't even have to wait for them here.

If I went for a coffee, they'd call me and I'd come back here. It wasn't unusual for them to call me for a house visit, so I went there also, to these house calls. And I say, it all looked so beautiful, we had a great time. The center of socializing was the church up there, because these people of Janjevo were very attached to their church. So when more important things were discussed, doctors and teachers were always involved in these infrastructural plans. What are we going to demand from the municipality? What are we going to demand from the province? Let's agree and they'll make it happen.

⁶ State-run manufacturing company in former Yugoslavia, founded in 1959. At the time, the company the company had many branches, one of them was in Janjevo.

So that happened in the church up there. I show up as a doctor, some of these scholars came, teachers or whoever. And then we make plans for how we would like this place to be, the best and the most desirable, for the good of all citizens. Then after a while, things started to crack there.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What were the houses then?

Omer Škrijelj: Well you can almost picture it based on how things look now. But now they're a bit run-down and back then they were pretty, the facades were repaired every spring. It was custom that everybody repainted in the spring, no exceptions. You saw it, it mostly painted in white, it looked very nice, compared to the roofs. It's that old turkish *ćeramida*,⁷ later they started buying these tiles (laughs). And well, even though the houses seemed fragile, they were reliable, they lasted a long time.

There's a good example, that tower of stones, you'll see somewhere south. It's around 300 years old, it belonged to Cirimotić family and they had their own [home], now it's empty. It was built, it was built from the materials that were found there. From stones, those earth-made adobes or from materials that they made. And they had great craftsmen. Craftsmen from Janjevo were renowned, they were even invited to work in other places. That's why these buildings are still around (laughs).

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What kind of craftsmen, can you tell us more?

Omer Škrijelj: Well, by way of life and organization Janjevo was never a village. Because by definition, economists know it better, a place is village if fifty percent of the people are in agriculture. Nobody here was in agriculture. We did various trades, plastics, metals, then the handiwork, then construction work, woodworking, even money was produced for a while, the old townsfolk say. I of course don't remember that (laughs), it was produced here because well, they hired people from certain groups and its been like that since the dawn of time.

Janjevo is more than 300 years old, actually more than 700. Because in 2003 it was the seven hundredth anniversary of Janjevo. So in 1303 Janjevo was formed. And it was formed by those Dubrovnik craftsmen. They came as craftsmen and not as men of agriculture. And so their reputation formed. Here you have a phenomenon, to mention something historical, I read about it and talked to these scholars. There's a phenomenon that the majority, I mean the minority, has assimilated to the majority. Today you have people of Janjevo declare that they are Serbs or Albanian, now they won't say anything besides that they are Janjevo catholics.

Because in order for them to be accepted in the *çarshia*, into that inner-circle where quality work was done, trades, production of precious metals, they had to accept the religion and the customs of those people. So the nearby Albanians came, Serbs from north and you can tell what they are from their last name, for example, it can't be like... I tell you, maybe I'm not that qualified. For example, for a Janjevo man to be a Đurić or Antić or what do I know here, Rodić or some others of Albanian descent, or Palja

⁷ Roof tiles typical of the houses in the countryside.

well, Palići and then these Burhani, Biklići, but later it was all mixed together, so that even today in the *çarshia* they call each other “*rođo*”.⁸ (laughs)

A Janjevo man could still remain muslim, I mean Albanian, and another one could become catholic. They all knew they had a shared history, and it didn't bother anyone. It's interesting, during the time when I came everybody spoke Turkish, it was kind of a universal language. The Croatians spoke Turkish also, the Albanians spoke Turkish, Roma also. And now that I mentioned Roma, a lot of Janjevo people spoke Roma also. Because most of the workers were Roma people, a lot of the businessman who owned companies knew how to speak it.

And they were friendly with them. No matter from where they came from, they created a very friendly environment. For you to come to a place where you can be yourself without any problems, that's a relief to the soul. When someone forbids you free expression, you're trapped in a cage (laughs). And here you can be open minded, you can say whatever you want, express yourself however you want, and nobody will take it personally (laughs). But then, the hard years came, war years. It began in Bosnia, Croatia and the Croatians moved out of here quickly. From '91-'92 practically 80 percent of the people in Janjevo left.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us, there was a meeting here, did Serbians come here?

Omer Škrijelj: Well, yes. Those were the encouragements, as I call them, encouragements. He comes, he walks, he doesn't have to say anything. Here, when Šešelj walked through Janjevo, he didn't have to say anything. He just, it was enough that he was here. It was almost as if, “What are you waiting for? We're fighting in Croatia, and you're sitting around here.” I mean, that was the meaning of it. So, encouragement wasn't necessary, people knew it, they felt the moment. In the end, Janjevo people have good intuition, they can figure things out for themselves. The state of Croatia was also very interested in these people and helping them find accommodation when they came from Janjevo. So they didn't go to live in tents, they went to a well organized housing area and they gave them separate housing units, which enabled them to leave [or stay] if they did not see themselves fit.

So somehow in one move, the interests of the Serbs and Croatians were satisfied, they could separate their people and free up the space in Janjevo. Which later was, unfortunately, a part of Serbian policy. To clear the space, and what they were intending to do, God knows, thank God it didn't happen. If everybody came to their place, everybody came to their house to live their life and the rest is up to God, as they say (laughs).

Part Two

Anita Susuri: Last time you said that Janjevo was, Janjevo was better than Pristina?

⁸ Srb.: *rođo* short for *rođak*, cousin.

Omer Škrijelj: Yes, yes. Well, I'm speaking from the point of view of relaxing and having fun, running away from everyday problems. Of course the infrastructure could be better here or the communications or educational systems, or any other aspect, but simply, here a man could find the best place for relaxation. And to forget those stresses that, that you went through during the day, it was relaxing here. Because, first, what may not be the case in other places, to come as a stranger, as a newcomer, someone who's not a local, you weren't judged in a certain way, instead you were welcomed.

It was like they tried to welcome you better than if someone from their family came. It was a code of conduct so to speak, I remember coming to Janjevo before I even started work officially. They knew I was accepted to Janjevo, I'd come with my friends, we'd have a few drinks. There was no reason to go home. They'd race to see who could treat us better. "Give this to the guests, give that." If you drank too much, they'd keep the car and someone would give you a ride home. You knew everything would be okay, so it was a real pleasure. You're simply filled with this warmth because you would see that you were among friends.

And then we, somehow we got to talking about how the year '90 brought such big changes, but big changes for the worse. Because if what happened hadn't happened, Janjevo could have been better. The youth would have continued to grow and make this place better, because the youth of Janjevo had started getting an education and getting degrees. They would have progressed with their trades, introduced new technologies. Janjevo could have been an example like some parts of Northern Italy with similar small trades.

But a fracture happened in the state, a fracture in society, many structures fell apart, and with that our very way of life fell apart. You had to adjust to some other, new wave lengths, so to speak. Because during the '90s, it was normal to always feel like everyone was a threat. First, the great shortage happened. If you didn't cut back, you won't have a chance to get a kilogram of sugar or a liter of oil or this or that. A lot of citizens were left without medical care because they were left [without medical protection plan], they were fired.

Officially, they left, but we know under which conditions they left. So what can you do with these people? I had 1200 Albanians who were without medical protection plan and what can I do? I saw them, kept quiet, managed to find medicine, what else? And it worked somehow, for a while at least. Then I met with some friends from Pristina through these people in the organization, humanitarian organization *Nëna Tereze*⁹ so we started bringing in some essential meds from that humanitarian group, which was...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What year was this?

⁹ The reference is to the local non-governmental organization *Nëna Terezë*. Throughout the 1990s in Kosovo, it provided humanitarian aid and assistance. This is not a reference to Mother Teresa of Calcutta, an Albanian, who was beatified in 2003.

Omer Škrijelj: It was in '91, '92. Those two years I was very involved. We even worked through this branch in Lipjan. We opened this infirmary with the Nëna Tereze organization, then we started to... let me praise my colleague Murat Zejnullahu. Him and I first started working in the infirmary. And then when other colleagues realized that this was a good thing, although we had resistance at first where many started practicing privately. They thought we were taking food from their mouths and so on. When they saw that it wasn't taking their business, but that it's helping the most endangered categories of people, they wanted to join and help. So that created a new image.

[Interview is interrupted]

So I'm telling you, this work, this humanitarian work somehow defined this period, for these two, three years it fulfilled me, to be honest. I felt so bad when a patient came, you hear this kid crying now, and you look at him, you look at him but you don't have anything to give to him. That is a horrible situation for a doctor. Because being able to help someone is more rewarding than money. Because what are you going to do with all that money if you have it, but you aren't happy with your job? So that, in a way, fulfilled me. In all that crisis, when you had nothing to offer, I suddenly had something to give. And you give it to those who need it most.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You worked both here and at Nëna Tereze?

Omer Škrijelj: Yes, I had working hours here and then later I'd be in Lipjan, in the Nëna Tereze infirmary and resume work there. One of the nurses that was in charge of this, she is from Janjevo originally, and to me the offer sounded like a great idea and I accepted immediately. And then it turned out this was very good and effective. I have some memories from that period that are filled with so many mixed feelings. First, you get disappointed that there are categories of people that I didn't know existed. They barely have clothes on, such misery and poverty, and you suddenly wonder how they even survive. On the other hand, the satisfaction when they walk out smiling, that they got something... (cries) And this is, I'm speechless.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: We have to talk about your family, how it came to be, how you started your family here? When did you get married?

Omer Škrijelj: Well, back then in '88-'89, I had my first marriage. My wife, as every other bride, likes to have her space, her own quiet corner and that led me to choose Janjevo as the place where I work and live. Later on things didn't work out, we got a divorce, so now I'm married to my second wife. I already have a daughter and a son. We still live here, my wife works in education, and she's happy. I see, she says that the kids as they are, at least they're sweet because they have support. So I guess this family atmosphere affected her and she's devoted to the kids and giving them the support they need.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: She still works in Janjevo?

Omer Škrijelj: Yes, yes, in Janjevo.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Is she from Janjevo?

Omer Škrijelj: No, no, she's also from where I am. So both of us are sometimes there in spirit and tradition, and by business here. Although now I wonder, what would we have decided (laughs) if someone had offered us to go somewhere else. It's important that we live very well now. Since then, my daughter got married, my son is now finishing his studies, he's going to be a doctor as well. So we'll see...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: He studies in Pristina?

Omer Škrijelj: No, in Mitrovica. Because he has to in his mother tongue, although he speaks Albanian well but the studies are a bit high level as they say, both for the language and everything. So he's finishing his studies there and we'll see how hiring will go, but I hope he'll be a good doctor. Because I can tell that we can discuss all sorts of things, that we're on the same page so...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Let's go back to the moment when Croats of Janjevo started to leave, do you remember that?

Omer Škrijelj: Yes, yes, here for example, I'll tell you this story from that time. Truck after truck went by, there, somewhere there {shows direction} near a strong community of Croats who decided to stay. About two hundred meters from here all the way to the post office they had been lined up and loaded into those trucks. It was a mass migration, it's hard to forget (laughs) for those from Janjevo. So now, an old lady comes for a check up but has no real problems.

And I say to her, "Grandma, what are you complaining about, what hurts?" She says, "The trucks hurt." I say, "They hurt all of us." (laughs) So there was this diagnosis also, "The trucks hurt." What really hurt was that you'd be just sitting with them in the evening, having a drink and hanging out and the next day they'd be gone. Because decisions were almost made overnight. First they'd say, "We're not going, we don't need to." And then something happens overnight, probably a neighbor goes, then another. Then they say, "Why would I stay, I'll go too." And so...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And what happened to their...

Omer Škrijelj: Properties?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Properties, and trades also, why couldn't they stay here?

Omer Škrijelj: Well, that's a story in itself. The Balkan war closed all doors for them. They lived here but they earned their money farther away. Mostly in the coast area. Now you imagine crossing Montenegro, sometimes even Bosnia to get to Croatia or straight to Croatia and there were war zones everywhere. So automatically their markets were cut off, they were secluded. And then they focused on Skopje. There were families that would only work in Skopje, so many others wanted to do the same.

But then there was nothing left for the ones originally there in Skopje, let alone for anyone new, so things in Macedonia also got disrupted. Most people then realized that it wasn't possible to work there, but they also didn't have other jobs. So they sold some of their machines and they bought some new ones there. Many moved them from here to Skopje. When they packed their things, they loaded their machines too, those were pretty big but that's how they survived. And they would resume their work wherever they went, however there still was a group of people who moved away that were extremely poor. They lived off of the rich. The solidarity and sense of community was big here.

Those who were well off did not hold back on helping the ones who weren't. So, for example, it was humiliating to just give the money to them like "Here," like a beggar. But they said, "Will you take this to my house, I bought something?" Even though his house was close, not even ten, fifty meters. He takes it, and he would give enough money to him to cover a *burek*¹⁰ or two drinks or whatever. And it's a long day, everybody gives something, and at the end of the day he is taken care of [financially] so that he can even take some home for his family. And that's how it worked. So they went there, to Croatia, that's why I started to talk about it, to these emergency shelters, that later became permanent ones.

You've heard of the neighborhood Kistanje? That's down by the bay of Zadar, towards the sea, around Zadar. It was previously inhabited by Serbians. War operations moved those people away. And then, they went into those houses, something that is heavily manipulated by the Serbian media. They did temporarily, it's true, but they left those Serbian houses quickly and they went in these newly built houses that Croatia built there, in Kistanje. So for example, when you compare what the media manipulates with actual information, like when I went to visit them, it's a different story.

The Kistanje community did publicly say that nobody wanted those Serbian houses that collapsed. It was not theirs, and they didn't want it. The people of Janjevo are sensitive about this, they don't want someone else's property. So the state of Croatia separated a field at the border of Kistanje, and houses were put there, that Marigona neighborhood, houses close to each other (laughs). But the quality wasn't that good. And then they were settled, each got a part of the land and from the old houses they... There were a few cases that they bought the houses and made it their own, they had the right to use it in this way, they tried to organize their lives here in Janjevo.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How come you went to visit them?

Omer Škrijelj: Well, it was a little sad and happy, you know. Because it happened ten years after they left. I was there in 2003 for the first time. And almost the whole village came, they were happy to see me because I worked with them there a lot, I helped as much as I could and they tell me that I helped more than I realize, but okay. That's a matter of personal judgment.

¹⁰ Burek is a family of baked filled pastries made of a thin flaky dough such as phyllo or yufka, of Anatolian origins and also found in the cuisines of the Balkans.

Anita Susuri: And how did you handle the war? Were you here?

Omer Škrijelj: Yes, yes, I was working, that was the only way I could survive. Because it's a very sensitive matter when the state, regardless of what kind of state it is, it was the only state in these territories. When you have a military obligation, you have to fulfill it. Now whether you'll be in uniform or not, it's a matter of chance. Well now, I was kind of a good diplomat in that case, I accepted a civil duty, not the military one. By law, I had the right to choose. And what I talked about earlier, that I went to those officer schools, then I was offered. Nobody could place me without asking because I was top level.

Then I accepted my civil duty to work non stop in my position. So during the war I was here and in Lipjan, practically in my house. I used it because it was so close, if my house wasn't so close, I would never see it (laughs). Otherwise, I was on standby for a possible catastrophe so I could intervene, so I could do my job. Actually at that time I devised a plan to help people. It wasn't in my job description. Actually some people told me that it meant a lot to them which I nearly forgot.

I took meds to some chronically ill people up in Androvac and Brus, because at that time, I don't know if your parents told you, but for Albanians it was forbidden to enter in an inhabited place, so cities. It was like that in Janjevo. Then I knew some Croatians to whom I'd give bags with meds and they'd know whom to give them to. We did that in Lipjan too, because in the entrance to Lipjan there were patrols that took people back. They even took people from buses and there were some very heavy, miserable situations that affect you as a person, and then you're in a dilemma, whether to do something or not.

But my family was trapped in the house almost like hostages, whatever I got wrong, they'd pay for it (laughs). And so I had to make a compromise to save the house, to save the family and so I could continue to help as much as I could.

Anita Susuri: Was the army here?

Omer Škrijelj: Here not so much. Less here, but in Lipjan, yes. Not so much here because I guess they had an agreement with the church here. This Janjevo priest was a very good diplomat and he knew how to make a deal with them so they wouldn't bother us. And when they persecuted some groups of Albanians from Androvac, Brus and around the area, he kept them safe in the church yard. Later even the albanian army in the forest, didn't want to bother Janjevo, so... when there weren't any conflicts, the people were calm. If there was a conflict, let's say between the military and UÇK¹¹ somewhere near, I'm sure that the people would have felt it. As it was in Slovenia for example or somewhere, but not here.

¹¹ *Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës* - Kosovo Liberation Army, was an Albanian guerrilla paramilitary organisation that sought the separation of Kosovo from Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbia during the 1990s.

Because neither side wanted to ruin the place that they went to sometimes to have a rest (laughs). So that's what they did. And somehow, what you remember the most are those major events. I don't have a lot of those ordinary life stories because that ordinary life quickly vanished. It all became tiring, it all became pure diplomacy, a struggle to survive because the way of life that existed when I came, around '89, '90, '91, ended when the mass migration began.

We would often see who was available and figure out where we were going to gather and relax. We got bored there, as young people. "Let's go for a coffee, let's go to Thessaloniki." So we went for three and a half hours to Thessaloniki. We'd have a cup of coffee and then we'd go back, that's how casual it was, and we had a lot [money] (laughs). And these were extremes, this didn't happen every day but it happened.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: As religion goes and *festat fetare* [In Alb: religious holidays]?

Omer Škrijelj: Ah this spiritual life. Religious life here is in great, in great harmony. Excellent, excellent harmony. You can even see from the balcony of the infirmary, a beautiful image, a church and a mosque in the same line {explains with hands} and there's so much tolerance that it's no problem for a Muslim to go up to church, to spend time there. It was no issue, it never was and thank God not even today. Here also, it's the same thing, there is great respect for religion, you can be Catholic or Muslim, nobody will look at you differently.

Especially because among Albanians you have to have both religions represented. So we have families with Islam, families with Catholicism, I even know of a lot of mixed marriages from the aspect of religion (laughs). So that works, it works.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And what was it like after the war?

Omer Škrijelj: Well there was some fear after the war, there was fear because people at first didn't know what happened, how the people that was expelled would react when everyone returned, it's something in the human soul, that spite, to return the blow. What would happen, how would they be regarded when they come back, if they would be called traitors, if this would happen. The people became pacified, they calmed down a little. Until they realized that they actually knew who to blame, they knew whose fault it was. But even the Serbian neighbors, weren't all targeted. I remember that in 2000, even 2001. I saw in Gračanica Albanians and Serbs drinking together. Why not?

So it was known who was active in what project, who was inhumane, and who minded their own business, who was a host. I wasn't bothered and I didn't bother anyone. Because, in the end, I knew what it was like, the road from Lipjan to Janjevo, I came everyday. Serbians were scared, they had loaded cars, tractors, with goods so if they had to, they would leave Kosovo. There's practically "two crazies," that's how I say, "two crazies" under quotation marks. If a rifle was fired in the middle of the village, everybody would run, but us, nobody had that in mind.

It wasn't the plan to move so many people globally, but more or less, they were targeting these certain groups in retaliation. Although I'm not for those retaliations. It is human to forgive and it is God's gift to forgive, and not to retaliate.

Anita Susuri: Do Croatians come even today when they have those holidays?

Omer Škrijelj: Yes, yes, yes. Although, less and less, because the older generation is dying away, and for the young ones that were born in Croatia Janjevo isn't appealing to them, so they come less and less.

Anita Susuri: What's it like when they come?

Omer Škrijelj: Well, good, good, we mostly reminisce about the old times. They are wealthy, they work well mostly, and Croatia is a country that offers more than we in the south can because it's a big country by surface area but not a lot of people there. It's almost four million people on a surface bigger than here, almost like Serbia or it's somewhere close, by surface area. So then there's work for everyone.

[Interview is interrupted]

Anita Susuri: If you could tell us, for example, how many Croatians worked in institutions here?

Omer Škrijelj: Well, not a lot by percent really, not a lot. You could even count them on your hand, there's a few of them, because... There were a few teachers, down in those party organizations, committees, this and that, two or three were hired. So practically you can count the Croatians on your hand who worked in the public sector. The rest were mostly private craftsmen and entrepreneurs.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And is there an industry left today, is anything still there from that life?

Omer Škrijelj: Nothing, nothing, we started to talk about it, when I talked about how the business in Janjevo influenced war operations, influenced a new movement, it's not here anymore. The breakthrough of Chinese goods. You get products from China, perfect compared to what's being made here and half price. So the product itself, the material needed to make one, one toy, they mostly made those toys, cost more than a ready-made toy from China. And so that, drove them away from the business.

So all that was left were those smelters, and they gradually disappeared because that small economy is losing its importance. For example Metalac closed down and its partners slowly backed out. Those people who were craftsmen and worked with metal, they had to have an industry for themselves where they could work for a bigger system. That suddenly vanished and didn't work anymore. So now, I think the majority, some 98 percent I can comfortably say, of Janjevo's people are in trade, and not crafts.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And what's the town like today, as far as you're concerned, what's the composition of the town?

Omer Škrijelj: You see, I don't have many compliments, to be honest. Because I'm used to a city life, and that's gone now. Now it's a rural system. Of course, there's no problem, there's not even a place to go and talk and hang out. We used to talk about other things, today about different ones, and now my topics of interest are... it's not about farming economics or whatever (laughs) so I'm there less and less, I almost don't even go to the taverns.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Are there any taverns left?

Omer Škrijelj: Yes, yes, there's three or four that are close and I don't know, I think there's not any in the *mahalla*¹² but mostly in the *çarshia*.

Anita Susuri: They're the only ones left?

Omer Škrijelj: Yes, there's one up, where the owner is Croatian and these three that Albanians own and... those are the active ones.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay, do you have anything to add, what you think would be interesting?

Omer Škrijelj: Something interesting? I don't know, I'd like something to be done to preserve some typical things. At least, for this architecture to be preserved, at least what's close to the center. So like, to preserve an authentic look of the town and to take care of the cleanliness because we are covered in trash. The water system is irregular, the sewers are even worse so you can smell it in the air, especially in the summer.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And do you know what influences the architecture has, here in your *çarshia*?

Omer Škrijelj: Well, I'd say, luckily the architecture is not damaged, it's not damaged in the *çarshia* itself. You have these new buildings, close to me. These others are all adapted buildings from that time, so it's easy to preserve. It's not a big problem to do it.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: But is it a typical Croatian architecture? Is it Croatian or Turkish architecture?

Omer Škrijelj: Let me tell you, I would guess that it's more a Turkish style, because the *çarshia* was Turkish, doesn't matter that Croatians lived there. Because, I mentioned at one point that even the older Croatians spoke Turkish. The type of roofs, the buildings they built, cobblestone, it exudes all the Orient... except maybe for those tight streets are also an Oriental feature, not just, well maybe for some, Orient has tight streets too. So, I think nothing is typical for Janjevo. It's nice that a place like this exists in Kosovo and I don't know of any other place like it.

¹² Word of Arabic origin that means neighborhood.