

Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH MEMEDALI GRADINA

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Duration: 86 minutes

Present:

1. Memedali Gradina(Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. Besarta Breznica (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

Anita Susuri: What kind of memories do you have from childhood?

Memedali Gradina: First, I'll introduce myself, I am Memedali Gradina, resident of Janjevo. I have lived in Janjevo since I was little, since I was six years old, until 11 years old. Then, I went to France with my family. I came back to Kosovo in '68, so in Janjevo. Janjevo, as I said, used to be Little Paris, that's what we used to call it. Janjevo was known for its sausage.

They would come from different places of Kosovo and outside of Kosovo just for that sausage. That's how Janjevo was known, from that sausage that was made here, Croats made it, of course. Back then, Janjevo had 7,500 citizens, in total, 7,500 citizens in total, Albanians, Croats, Roma, Bosnians, Turks.

There were no Serbs in Janjevo, there aren't any even to this day. Janjevo, as I remember it, as I said, Little Paris, I remember when I went out as a seven-year-old child, in the center of Janjevo, Croats would buy groceries and I would carry their shopping bags, that's how I would earn money for a day. So, that's how powerful Janjevo was back then, those years, so from '75 or something like that, Janjevo...

Anita Susuri: Do you remember the city?

Memedali Gradina: This city hasn't changed at all, it just got ruined, it got ruined... You might have walked around Janjevo, you've seen how many houses are demolished, because Croats left. Not after the war, they left before the war. Well, then war made it even worse, but before war, there were eight or nine cafés in Janjevo.

I remember when I used to go out to earn money, I would go into cafés, during the summer, there were no free places to sit. There were no free chairs. But a little... then it started to get blocked, I don't even

want to mention his name, because he left a scar in our hearts. When he [Šešelj]¹ came to Janjevo, then the Croats started leaving, and since then Janjevo started to fade out.

Anita Susuri: Šešelj, right?

Memedali Gradina: Yes, Šešelj, then Janjevo started to fade out.

Anita Susuri: Let's go back to when you were little, what did your family do? What did your father do?

Memedali Gradina: My father worked for the Croats, there were no state jobs, actually, there was a time when there used to be a factory, Metalac Factory, but to work there you had to know someone. Just like today, nothing has changed. So back then my father used to work for the Croats, with those machines that they used to produce kids' toys and plastic mostly.

My mother worked in a butcher shop, she would make the sausages of Janjevo that I mentioned. That's how they used to support us, because we were two brothers and three sisters. Back then we were little, but we were seven family members, my grandparents and uncles, we all lived in the same house. The house is down there. So, 27 people lived in two rooms. But slowly the time came... My father went to France by himself first.

We started school here. I went to school, so did my sister, the others were too young. But life was much better than now. Whatever we earned, what we ate was more delicious than now. For example, because now people don't really have the willpower to live anymore. Back then, as children, eleven, twelve years old, kids, ten years old, we didn't care about anything except having a little money and going to school and learning. Now if you ask youngsters, they don't have the willpower to live or work. Back then, one person would work, 25 people would be able to eat from that salary. While now, even if 25 people work, not even ten people can eat from that.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned that your father worked in a workshop for Croats?

Memedali Gradina: Yes, in a workshop.

Anita Susuri: Can you tell us, for example, what were those workshops like? Which Croat homes had those workshops? Who worked there? Did they work by themselves, or did they get workers?

Memedali Gradina: A minority of Croats did not have machines to produce, but the majority had them. Most of the houses had them, and, of course, they had employees from Roma houses, people who worked for them. And there were three or four houses, people who worked at Metalac. But the majority of Roma people worked for them.

¹ Vojislav Šešelj (1954-) is the founder of the nationalist Serbian Radical Party. In 2003 he surrendered to the International Criminal Court for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), where was indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity. In 2016 he was acquitted of the crimes.

Look, we benefited a lot from our relationship with Croats, because we... Even today, there are two families here, I don't know how many Roma houses work for them. I myself worked for them, but I left the job. However, before, before the majority of Croat houses had machines, they had workshops, but workshops were in their houses, at home. For example, part of the house was a workshop, and there they slept and lived. Like that, they managed to give a salary to the worker, they also worked and produced.

Then at one point, at one point, when my father started to build this house, then he was loaned a lot of money from his boss, the owner, how to put it, he took a loan to start building this house where we are at the moment. Then we had to start working for him, the children, the mother, all of us. Then he brought, now in this room where we are at the moment, it became a workshop.

We had two machines here, small ones with which we worked. However, the elderly worked with machines, the younger ones put pieces of them together. We made these hair accessories, those, I don't know the names, you are young, I don't think you have seen them, they were like eights, they had a stick with which you locked your hair behind.

We made those, we made those dolls for kids, toys, clackers, stuff like that... Stuff like that. We would split the workload, then we put those together, clackers. Here at our house, we have put them together, we made them. We put them together here and sent them in boxes to that owner there, that's how we earned a bit and paid off the loan. Of course, my father had to go into debt to start building the house.

Anita Susuri: How old were you back then?

Memedali Gradina: What?

Anita Susuri: How old were you when you worked there?

Memedali Gradina: I was seven years old. I was seven years old, but however, my [paternal] uncles are really close, how do I say, they help each other... and back then, however, we were together, we lived in the same house. That house is down there, now no one is there. So they helped, my uncles, my cousins, we worked a little, we were like ten workers who worked and earned money. We earned enough money.

Anita Susuri: Did you work only with plastic, or with metal also?

Memedali Gradina: We also worked with metal, we used to make hair accessories, then we would turn them into an eight. We worked with metal also, but mostly with plastic. Mostly with plastic.

Anita Susuri: You said that your mother worked in a butcher shop...

Memedali Gradina: Yes, butcher shop.

Anita Susuri: You told us that Janjevo was known for its meat, sausage. Do you remember those butcher shops? Where were those? Who were the owners?

Memedali Gradina: Croats, the one who owned that shop was also Croatian. He also sold the meat and sausages that he would roast in the center, he had a barbecue grill and all of that. His workshop was down there. I know because I used to go there when I got hungry, to tell you the truth, I would go where my mother worked. I used to look at her while she would dry the sausages, before they even dry, she would say... she would give me some to eat.

Of course, back then there was more poverty, but it was sweet poverty, while now it's a pretty boring poverty. Here in Janjevo, at this moment, I'll get back to it. To this day, let's leave... At this moment, there are like three or four Roma families that have a good life.

Now look, good life, what does a good life mean? A good life, for me, my wife works, I don't work, but she does *alhamdulillah* [praise be to God]! There are people who don't even have this much. My mother gets 90 euros from her retirement, she has that, my wife is a teacher, she is a teacher here in Janjevo, *alhamdulillah* [praise be to God], it's good.

Anita Susuri: What was it like for the Roma community back then, when you were a kid, what was life like then?

Memedali Gradina: Look, Janjevo back then, as I mentioned, I have to mention again, was Little Paris. No one cared what or how you are. To this day, we live here as brothers, no matter if they're Roma, Turks, or Albanians. To this day we are... I remember as a kid we didn't care what was happening outside of Janjevo.

We lived in Janjevo, "Brotherhood and Unity," that's the saying. And when someone would build something, so to say, if they built a bathroom, we would all go and help. While now, if you buy something, no one helps you carry the bag without pay.

Anita Susuri: You... I wanted to ask you about the Roma community, you told me... back then, even the owners talked in Roma language with their employees, so Croats also spoke Roma. Is this true? Do you remember?

Memedali Gradina: Look, the Croats who have houses in Roma neighborhoods spoke the language better than we did. And the owners, of course, learned the language, but the Croats aren't the only ones who speak the Roma language. If you go out in the center right now, there are a lot of Albanians who speak the Roma language. That's why I said, before and after war, we're still with the "Brotherhood and Unity" idea. We didn't have any problems here, not even during the war, we didn't have any problems.

Anita Susuri: What about the city, do you remember the cafés there, *Bash Çarshia*, and another one next to *Bash Çarshia*?

Memedali Gradina: Yes.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember? Was it there even then?

Memedali Gradina: Yes, *Bash Çarshia* is quiet... I remember when I would come on holiday, that when *Bash Çarshia* was opened, it was where the bakery is now. I don't know if you were at the center? Where the bakery is now, that's where the café was, so when I was little, seven or eight years, there used to be a Croat who made coffee there. Then there was another café a little further... You don't know how many cafés Janjevo used to have. Many cafés, for the young people, too.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember in which year *Bash Çarshia* opened?

Memedali Gradina: *Bash Çarshia*, I think in the beginning of '80, around that year.

Anita Susuri: Was the owner Croatian or Albanian?

Memedali Gradina: No, the owner was Croatian. He also had a butcher shop, he had the butcher shop and that café. He would make Janjevo sausages. He opened that café. Then after the war, it was bought by some Turks. And near that, where the mosque is, in case you have seen the yard of the mosque, there used to be a café there too, but then the mosque bought that land.

Anita Susuri: What about a café near there, an old one, 1928, do you remember that? They say that it used to be a café then a shop...

Memedali Gradina: In front of *Bash Çarshia*?

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Memedali Gradina: In front of *Bash Çarshia*, there used to be a state-run café, a state-run café. They used to have singers and stuff, I remember that surely, I remember because 55 years ago...

Anita Susuri: Were you ever there? What was the atmosphere like?

Memedali Gradina: The atmosphere was, how do I put it? That will never return. That atmosphere will not return here. That café was always full. There was music, they had singers. The young and old went there, even the middle-aged. Whoever could get in, whoever had money, of course. You cannot enter a café without money to pay for drinks. There were no divisions, no one cared if you were Croat, Roma or an Albanian. No, no, no. Regardless, we ate and drank there together. All together. We had no issues among one another. But I don't think that time will come back. Life was really tasty, life was sweet.

Anita Susuri: You went to the Vladimir Nazor School, right?

Memedali Gradina: Yes, it was called Vladimir Nazor back then.

Anita Susuri: Do you have any memories from that time?

Memedali Gradina: I used to go to school there. The teachers were mostly Serbians. Of course, the majority were Serbian, because there were also Croatians. It used to be a Croatian-Serbian school, Albanians went there also, but we were separated. The school... back then, actually it's a shame if I complained, because to this day, I don't have any problems with the school, when we used to go out during the breaks, we would all hang out together. For example, what we would get... back then we didn't have enough money to buy snacks in the market like now. But we would take, for example, we would take sandwiches or something from home. Some would forget to take them, or they didn't have enough, we would share. It wasn't possible for some to eat and some not to eat. Like now, they go buy snacks for themselves, and they don't even say, "Take some," to those who can't afford it. No, back then we all ate together.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember any more details about Janjevo before going to France?

Memedali Gradina: Well look, there are a lot of details. Back then, Janjevo people had three-four cars, to begin, for example, I was eight years old when I cut this finger, at the time, there were three or four cars in Janjevo, or not. People had a lot of wealth, but there were no cars. Janjevo was always a calm place, Janjevo never had problems.

Janjevo as Janjevo, if the Janjevo Croats stayed and did not leave, at the time, we called Janjevo a Little Paris, today, we would call it Big Paris. But Lipjan was always poor, it is like that to this day. Even during Serbian time, and even now it is like that.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember when the municipality building existed? The municipality building of Janjevo?

Memedali Gradina: Look, at that time, I had already moved to France. When they started, I had already moved to France. Then I wasn't here at all for about four-five years because they wanted me to go into military service. I, to be honest, that's why I fled. I didn't come because of my military service. I noticed Janjevo had changed a lot after seven years or something when I came for holidays. Because Roma, the minorities would work, but they didn't work in the market, selling things. But after they went, Romas started trading.

Anita Susuri: So at that time, before you went to France here... the library was near the Roma neighborhood, do you remember?

Memedali Gradina: Yes, yes. There used to be a cinema where the post office is now. Maybe you saw where the post office is? That area in front of the post office... now there's nothing there, the library

used to be there. There used to be a library there, I used to go to the library and get books to read. There used to be a library, those Roma you saw living there, they're living there because of the time... the library was upstairs, they used to live downstairs, so they're left there.

Anita Susuri: How did they live there? Did someone give them permission to do that?

Memedali Gradina: I think the state let them live there.

Anita Susuri: It's a huge space there I think...

Memedali Gradina: That's where the cinema used to be.

Anita Susuri: Did you ever go to that cinema?

Memedali Gradina: Yes, of course. We didn't have TVs back then. I remember, now going back, my grandfather had bought an Ambassador Television in '72. That's when we built this house. We used to put the TV on the window, we would sit in the yard and watch movies with people from the neighborhood. When I was very little, before we bought the TV, there were two or three TVs in our community. We had two or three TVs.

We used to go and watch movies, once a week they would bring them from Lipjan. They would have movies, of course, we had to pay to watch them. The cinema was like the ones in Pristina. In Pristina there still might be cinemas to this day, but they're not as popular as back then (coughs), because now there are different programs on TV.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember what kind of movies you would watch? Do you have any memories? Did you go there with your friends?

Memedali Gradina: Yes, with my friends, with my friends, for example, I had the money to pay for three cinema tickets, whoever did not have, someone had half of the money, but not the rest. We gathered it between ourselves, we were ten or twelve friends, we gathered the money. Regardless if I had more or less money, we bought the tickets and got in. We watched a movie with cowboys or Indians, that's what was available back then. And some movies from India, that's what was in the repertoire back then. Then after a long time, sometime in '75, '76, around that time Turkish movies began, we called them Kara Murat² and stuff, I remember that. We watched Turkish movies, karate, those from China and stuff like that.

Anita Susuri: That part where the cinema used to be, were there any celebrations held there, like weddings?

² Produced in 1976, the Kara Murat movie is based on one of Turkey's most popular comic characters - a rogue hero who fought for truth and justice during the Ottoman Empire.

Memedali Gradina: Yes, yes, yes. When they stopped showing movies there, that hall was left empty. No chairs or anything. And then they, mostly Roma, would have weddings there because...

Anita Susuri: It was spacious.

Memedali Gradina: It was spacious and free. You could put chairs and tables there. I remember, it was very good at that time, they would have weddings there, and it was more beautiful than now, when they have them in restaurants. Because look, when my son got married ten years ago, but it wasn't their fate to live together, we had the wedding in a restaurant. Believe me, it wasn't as beautiful...

Anita Susuri: What were the weddings like?

Memedali Gradina: The wedding food was prepared at home. They didn't order food in the restaurants. Two or three women would make food at home.

Anita Susuri: For example, when you were celebrating, did Croatian and Albanians come?

Memedali Gradina: Always. There were no weddings without Croatians, Albanians or Turks, no.

Anita Susuri: Was the Roma neighborhood always here? Or is there any other neighborhood in Janjevo where Roma families live?

Memedali Gradina: In Janjevo, there's only one Roma family in the center. They bought that house after the war from a Croat, also there's an Ashkali, well, he's Roma too. The Ashkali is in the road uphill, he is there, but we were here in this part that you can see, we were always here.

Anita Susuri: Were the neighborhoods divided?

Memedali Gradina: Look, some were next to each other, so they were called the Roma neighborhood, the Turkish neighborhood on the other side...

Anita Susuri: On the other side of the river?

Memedali Gradina: Yes, on the other side of the river, the Turkish neighborhood was on the other side of the river. Then, most of the Croatians were in the center, the Albanians were uphill, like this, Albanians were also down there. There were always the Roma neighborhood, Turkish neighborhood, Latin neighborhood, Croatian neighborhood, next to each other.

Anita Susuri: What about you, did you have the same culture, for example, did Croatian or Turkish culture affect you, how did you get those traditions?

Memedali Gradina: Look, we got our traditions more from Croatians, because we worked more with them, and we were friendlier with them, that's why. But what can we do, that's how it used to be back then, even now, for example, most of them can't speak Albanian.

Anita Susuri: Croatians?

Memedali Gradina: No, no, Roma. Most of the Roma community can't speak Albanian. Why? Because they didn't have as much contact with them [Albanians] as they did with Croatians. They would work for Croatians, they would befriend them, they would work and be their friends. For example, Croatians had two or three kids, they would be friends. As they would say, the money attracts (laughs). That's... but we still lived together no matter what.

Croatians were more wealthy and stuff, but we lived together regardless. For example, when there were different celebrations, it's impossible to not invite Albanians, Turks and Croatians, impossible. For example, there's a video I can show you when I came back from France because my brother was getting married...

[The story continues in part two]

Part Two

Memedali Gradina: When my brother got married, I knew that that small room there would have around 550 guests. Then the old school up there, I don't know if you visited the old school, the yard of the old school? I had two tents around 30 meters wide. I had 520 guests there. It was an international wedding, so...

Anita Susuri: Which year was this?

Memedali Gradina: '90... I forgot the year, it should have been around '92, around '92-'93.

Anita Susuri: So you weren't prohibited from having weddings and celebrations in public spaces?

Memedali Gradina: No, no, no one prohibited us. If someone came, look, back then, weddings lasted for a week. The preparations and stuff, do we play music a week before, all the time, from morning to dawn. The neighbors never complained, or said... they would come to congratulate us, and ask if we needed help, and they would help out. But they would never come to yell at us, or stop us, we never had problems.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask you, what was your clothing like back then? Were they the same as the Croatians?

Memedali Gradina: No, Croatians had another culture. They had other clothing, they were more extra. They had those *dimia*³, they were handmade. While us, and the Albanians had the same *dimia*, with some coats in front, like they used to be back then... Now, for example, the scarves, but back then there were also some coats, some scarves, some... But the *dimia* were the same, with some vests made with gold, I remember. I used to call them *samara*, it was the same with Albanians and Romas, there was no difference. While Croatians had different clothing.

Anita Susuri: There's a river near the neighborhood, was it always dried out, or what was it like?

Memedali Gradina: The river was clean, it happens to be that it was cleaner than today's well. As a child, I know that we built a wall, a wall, and the water would gather. There we made a swimming pool and had a swim there. Because before, there were no swimming pools, as is the case today, "Let's go to the swimming pool!" Our swimming pool was in that river. There was no sewage system there, later, sometime in the '80s or something like that, perhaps earlier. Sometime in the '80s, I assume, it might be two years earlier or later... in '78 or so, they began installing the sewage system and stuff like that. It's sad, they polluted the river. It's very sad.

Look, I'm up here, the only things hard to access are water and wood. If there was a road, for example, if you came with a tractor or car... because you can't stay down there for even five minutes. When I hear people complain, I say, "Did I come from up there to do this? You did it yourself. You throw garbage in the river. Why do you throw it there when you only have to pay five euros for garbage maintenance." You fill the garbage cans, the truck comes and takes it. But that's what they're used to, they blame the Municipality for what they do. No, it's not the Municipality's fault!

Anita Susuri: So you're saying that river...

Memedali Gradina: Around '78 they started...

Anita Susuri: Why did they install the sewage system? Is that a problem, or is it because of the people?

Memedali Gradina: Of course, it was a problem that they installed the sewage system. Back then, there were a lot of houses, more than now. It's a problem because there isn't enough water for the sewage system. Also, they filled it with garbage, as you saw, it's filled with garbage. The water will drain out slowly. It's draining out because it isn't raining or snowing, the climate is changing slowly. And as the climate changes, if the river drains out, it will be a problem. They started to fix something, but they stopped, and I think it will continue to stay like this. I hope they fix it but...

Anita Susuri: And over there is the Saraji⁴ neighborhood, there's a tower there. Do you have any memories of that part?

³ Billowing white satin pantaloons that narrow at the ankles, Turkish style. They are made with about twelve meters of fabric.

⁴ Turk. *Saray* means palace, but is also adopted in Albanian to name the neighborhoods.

Memedali Gradina: I know who lived in that tower, and I know everything about it. A Croat lived there. He used to sell fruits in the center; they moved out of Janjevo well before the war. Before Šešelj came, they moved away. That tower, they lived further down there, I don't think there was anything up there, but I know who lived in that tower.

Anita Susuri: What kind of a family was there?

Memedali Gradina: There used to be a family that we used to call Pashka. His sons moved away, he died there. He was alone with his wife. First, he died, then his wife died and it was left empty. And I think, during the war, an Albanian family moved in there, because they didn't have a place to live. They moved in there, now I think it's empty, no one is there.

Anita Susuri: What happened to that Albanian family? Did they get out of there?

Memedali Gradina: Yes, yes, they did. They left, nothing... you know it's what time does. It harmed some, and so on, but they lived there for a while and then they left.

Anita Susuri: What about that Croatian family, why did they have a tower? Usually people had houses. How come they had a tower?

Memedali Gradina: That happened before I was born. I don't know how it happened, I just remember who lived there and those kinds of things. I don't remember how it happened.

Anita Susuri: So, they sold fruits?

Memedali Gradina: Yes, yes. He would guard the grapes in Janjevo, because back then there were a lot of grapes in Janjevo, and he would guard them so no one would steal the grapes. Of course, kids would go and take a couple of grapes, so he would guard the grapes. I remember he would carry a rifle, his sons would sell fruits here in the center of Janjevo.

Anita Susuri: I think the winegrower Gradina that was here, or what was his name, Glama, that vineyard over there hill with grapes?

Memedali Gradina: Glama is this way, while Gradina is my last name. It is near the old clinic where the mill is, if you have seen where the mill is, in front of it used to be the vineyard where there were grapes and stuff...

Anita Susuri: Do you remember Janjevo's greenery, they say there used to be a lot of greenery, vineyards?

Memedali Gradina: Well, during the season, for example, in August, everybody had their donkeys, the baskets on their donkeys. We used to get some workers, because it was impossible to harvest the grapes on our own. We used to get workers and do it. We would go up and down with the donkeys all

the time, I remember that. There were enough grapes in Janjevo to supply all of Kosovo. But now, there isn't much, no one is harvesting and it's lost.

Anita Susuri: You said you went to school here for a few years, and then continued in France...

Memedali Gradina: Yes, I continued in France.

Anita Susuri: Can you tell us about that period of time? How did you go there?

Memedali Gradina: Well, my father went there first in '73, he noticed there wasn't work here. He went, while my mother was here with five children. Of course, that's why when you asked if my mother knew how the meat was made, those were our worst times, we were in crisis. I remember that time more clearly than any other. I used to go and get a piece of the sausage my mother used to make where she was working, and a piece of bread and I would eat it at school.

I remember the school, I was there up until the fourth grade. But school was different back then. The respect between teachers and... the school back then was an actual school not like now...

Anita Susuri: When you traveled to France, was it... I think you went to Paris, or which city?

Memedali Gradina: To Lyon.

Anita Susuri: Was it the first you traveled out of Janjevo, or did you travel before that?

Memedali Gradina: No, no, for the first time I went there in '75. My father took my sister and one of my brothers, and then in '77 me and my other brother went there. He got all of us there slowly. My father went from France by car for vacation for a month, and that's how we went there. The first time, not that I have been anywhere else... but the first time I got out of Janjevo... I was in Pristina and Lipjan, but that was the first time I traveled outside of Kosovo, when I went to France.

Anita Susuri: What was that experience like? How did that place seem compared to where you lived?

Memedali Gradina: When I went to France, I started crying because I wanted to come back. I didn't even stay there for ten days, I would fight with my late father all the time, "Take me back where you took me, take me back to Kosovo, to Janjevo."

Anita Susuri: Why?

Memedali Gradina: I didn't have friends, I didn't have... life was different, there were huge buildings, I wasn't used to it. Anyways, after two weeks or so, I started going to school. I would tell myself, "Learn the language, or you'll be left with nothing." So I had to learn the language, but that went well for me. I learned French within six months or so. Then it was easier.

Anita Susuri: What did you do there? What did you do?

Memedali Gradina: First, I started learning the language there, I learned French for about a year, then I started school. Of course, I started from the beginning there, because the classes weren't the same as here. I started from the beginning, but since I was older, they allowed me to finish two academic years per year, until I caught up to students my age. Then, when I finished eighth grade, I started high school for mechanics...

Anita Susuri: So, you got part of your education there?

Memedali Gradina: Yes, yes. Not a part of it, I got most of my education there.

Anita Susuri: Was there a special school for foreigners, or how did it work?

Memedali Gradina: No, no, it was a normal school with French people, a normal school. There wasn't a special school.

Anita Susuri: Do you have any memories of that time?

Memedali Gradina: I have many memories, it's a huge story there, because how do I say it, I spent the better part of my youth there. I also got my driver's license in France.

Anita Susuri: So you finished elementary school in France, then what did you do?

Memedali Gradina: I continued going to school. Yes, I continued, I went to learn a craft, to become a mechanic. So I went to school to become a mechanic for four years. That's what France offers for youngsters, not just France, all over Europe. They give youngsters opportunities. I just went to the bank to ask for a loan to buy a mechanic garage, they gave it to me immediately.

I had already found a garage... I didn't have the money to pay him, but he went to the bank to take it. He went to the bank, the bank paid him and I would slowly pay back the money to the bank. There I had my own garage, the moment I finished school I bought my own garage and worked.

Anita Susuri: For how many years did you work?

Memedali Gradina: I worked for three years, three years. From '82 to '85. Then in '85, my parents and siblings came back, and I went back to France in '86, but I couldn't stay there without my family, all alone. So I came back, I sold the garage there and everything. When I came back, I built my brother's house. That's how we spent that money.

Anita Susuri: When you came back to Janjevo, what had changed? What was the city and atmosphere like back then?

Memedali Gradina: Look, then, to tell you the truth, when I came back in '85, I didn't see any changes. There weren't big changes when I came back, the moment I came back, I started working in markets. I had a van that I brought from France, after a year, I sold it and bought a truck.

The work went well, I worked with my brothers, me and my two other brothers, the three of us worked, it was good. Because the Latins moved away, they went to Croatia, then we had commerce all to ourselves. We would work like that. There was a lot of work, there was a lot of work back then. We would also earn money, not just work. But I didn't notice any changes there. I would work every day, I would leave in the morning and come back at night.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask about the time you got married, when you met your wife. How did that happen? Do you remember?

Memedali Gradina: Yes, of course, you always remember that. When I came back from France, so in '86, I knew I wasn't going back. Now I want to see where I can go out and stuff like that. I wasn't planning on getting married but just meeting someone. I had a friend, he worked at Metalac. He was my cousin, not friend, cousin. He worked at Metalac and she was also working there, my wife, she used to work at Metalac. She is from Gushterica, do you know where Gushterica is?

He called, he said, "I know what you're like, I know a girl that works with me, she is very nice, she is capable, educated just like you..." She finished university, my wife, she finished university. I said, "If she had finished university, she would have gotten another job, not there at Metalac." "No, she couldn't find another job." And it was the truth. "Come on," I said, "Let's meet."

I met her, we went out once, twice, three times, and eventually, after six months, I sent my family to ask for her hand in marriage. Her father died a long time ago, she was left just with her mother and her younger sister, she is fourteen years younger. She told me, "I will come. But you have to know you will have to take care of my mother and sister because no one can take care of them."

And, as I told you back then, I was dealing with commerce, so I didn't need her salary. I told her, "That salary that you get, you can give it to them, I don't need it." "But I want to keep working." "Why would I stop you from working, you continue doing so." So that's how I met her, my family went to ask for her hand in marriage. I told her, "I don't want a wedding, it's not because of the money, but I think it's stupid spending money for no good reason. Let's go on a vacation for ten days." "No, I don't want to." And that's what happened...

Anita Susuri: What did your wife do at Metalac?

Memedali Gradina: She worked with them, I don't know how to tell you, they would test acid, she would produce acid. Like a laboratory, how do I say, she was a laboratory technician.

Anita Susuri: What did she study?

Memedali Gradina: She studied to become a laboratory technician. She finished it, but she couldn't find a job. She was like my daughter now... I have a daughter and a son. My son finished veterinary studies, but he can't find a job, but my daughter finished the medical university seven years ago. She realized she couldn't find a job, and she got married seven years ago, near Brezovica. I don't know if you know the place, in Shterpce.

She got married there, she has two children, a boy and a girl, she is still unemployed. When I asked if she can get a job here, my late father was the representative of the Roma community, he was the representative for more than 30 years. He asked Shkuri Buja, who was the mayor at the Municipality of Lipjan, he said, "Yes, yes." And then a Serbian was hired to do that job instead of her.

She couldn't work. To tell you the truth, I went to Gushterica to ask the Serbs... anywhere, just so my daughter would get employed since she finished school. But they were asking for money, so I said, "If I had that much money, she wouldn't need to work at all." But what can you do? Then, my daughter got married, so she finished school in vain, she just put effort into those four years of school for no reason. There were no buses during the winter so she would walk up and down... but what can you do, this is how life is, we have to say *alhamdulillah* for the things we have.

Anita Susuri: What about the time when you came back, how had the atmosphere and people changed? Did anything change?

Memedali Gradina: No, there were no strong changes, the atmosphere was the same like before going to France, more or less. Only after the war, I don't know where the people I grew up with are. I could say... Look, this is how it used to be back then, my grandfather back then, like I told you that 27 of us used to live in a two-room house. I have another house down there. Back then, when foreign guests would come, of course, Roma minorities, my grandfather would go and bring them home to eat, drink coffee, and then he would go and visit the neighbors alongside them.

Now guests come to our door, we open it, "What do you want?" This is what's happening now. While back then, *subhanallah*,⁵ back then... There are 39 houses in Janjevo, so people don't visit each other. We just talk to each other when we meet on the street or the center, "How are you?" This is how things are now. I don't know why this change happened, but it did.

Anita Susuri: So in the Bazaar there, the mosque, do you have any memories of the mosque?

Memedali Gradina: Look, as I remember the mosque back then, well now they have fixed it, and to tell you the truth I used to not go to the mosque back then, I've been going there to pray these past few years. I didn't go to the mosque before, but I knew the imam very well, the late Mulla Irfan. He was my father's friend, he would come over.

⁵ *Subhanallah* is an Arabic Term, there is no correct or precise definition in English but more generally *Subhanallah* means "Allah is Perfect" or "Glory be to God".

He would come over, my father would go over to his house. Mulla Irfan, so our imam, and [Don Matej](#), the priest, they kept Janjevo like it was, with brotherhood and unity. Those two, if it wasn't for those two... then after the war, in some place where Roma people burned, and... We didn't do anything, that's why we're here to this day. Everybody knows, all over Kosovo, that us from Janjevo didn't do it... we just helped during the war.

In Janjevo we just helped our Albanian brothers, because they couldn't go out, while we would at least go out to buy sugar, tea, or biscuits for children. But, after the war, the priest and the imam, Mulla Irfan calmed down the people of Janjevo... that's why, you walk around Janjevo and you can't see any burned down houses, no, no, no. Some that were ruined on their own, that's another thing, because when there are no people living in a house, the roof gets dry, it starts leaking slowly and the house...

Anita Susuri: Since you mentioned the houses, do you remember what they were like? When they weren't destroyed, when you were younger? Did you go there? Do you remember those houses?

Memedali Gradina: Look, first, for example, when we came back from France, I told you that the atmosphere hadn't changed. In '87 we started to build this house here, this is my house, and that is my house. Well, mine, I started building it for my brother.

Trucks and cars don't come up here to bring the materials. So we had to carry it all by hand here, so the sand, the cement, the ceramic, everything. We carried it all, that's how it used to be. They would bring the materials down there, 20-30 people would gather and within an hour we would bring all the materials up here.

Part Three

Anita Susuri: For example, the houses of Croats were more special? How do you remember them?

Memedali Gradina: What do you mean special?

Anita Susuri: Appearance wise, they were two-story houses, one-story houses, were they different from Albanian homes?

Memedali Gradina: No, no, they weren't different. Not on the outside. On the outside, the houses were the same as today. But there were some differences on the inside. I didn't go to all the houses, but those few I visited were different. Like, for example, the difference was that they had more space than we did, we were 27 people in a house, they had better furniture, newer furniture. We... when things would break, they would give them to us, "Do you want it, so we don't throw it?" That's how it was. Well, to this day... even for us, "This broke, take it so I don't throw it out. Will you come and take this, because I'm buying another one?"

Anita Susuri: They had big families, they had a lot of children.

Memedali Gradina: They used to say, “There’s never enough children and money. So, a family would have twelve-thirteen children.

Anita Susuri: What was it like as a child living in that atmosphere with a lot of friends, children?

Memedali Gradina: Look, it’s a known fact, like when there are five or 50 people at a wedding, the atmosphere is better. Of course, the more people, the better it is. If I could go back now... we used to be 27 family members back then. As a child, I remember that my grandmother, may she rest in peace, when she used to put a sheet... a table sheet, because we didn’t even have a *sofra*,⁶ just a table sheet, like in the military. Like this, two or three people didn’t even have their own plate. We would eat like soldiers, ten people to one plate. Now we are four family members, I don’t remember the last time I bought 25 kilograms of flour. My wife always bakes bread, she doesn’t want to buy it at the bakery, I don’t remember the last time I bought 25 kilograms of flour.

Anita Susuri: At the time you came back and said there weren’t many changes. When did you notice changes with the people and the atmosphere start to happen?

Memedali Gradina: After the war. Look, until ‘95, ‘96, even before the war, people started to get bored. Commerce lowered, people started going abroad. Now, I don’t know if they noticed, or if they knew something was going to happen, God knows. But after ‘95, ‘96, people started getting bored. Anyways, in ‘99 when the war started, people started... Croats, there weren’t any Croats in Janjevo.

When the bombing started, there weren’t any, they moved away, they went to Croatia, they closed their houses. I think just one family was left, the one who had the café, a young boy with his wife were left. The Roma community, of course, they were scared, hearing the bombing, this and that... I had another lamp in the ceiling, I was so scared I fixed it here, because it was downwards, it was another one.

The bomb was dropped in Gračanica, the lamp fell on the floor here. Of course, my children were little, they were in the hallway, they just heard the noise. And of course, they were children, they were terrified. My brother said, “I can’t let my children go through this,” he said, “I will move away with the rest of the Roma.” “Be safe, here is the money.” We had money back then, we were working. “How much money do you need?” “This much.” “Here.”

He went away, then my other brother said, “I will also go because of the children.” “Okay.” I said, “It’s not because of the children, it’s because of the wife.” There’s a saying, “Where the chicken crows, it’s hard.” (laughs) I’m sorry for saying this. He wanted to go, so they went. My late father begged me, he said, “Listen, go, things aren’t going to get better here.” “No, Father, you don’t know anything, it’s

⁶ Low round table for people to gather at communal dinners, sitting on the floor.

going to be better than in America here.” “I am almost 70 years old and you know better than I do?” “You will see,” I said, “It’s going to be better than in America here.”

So, to tell you everything, I thought everything would get better here. Anyway, I wasn’t scared, I had nothing to be scared of, I didn’t hurt anyone. But, as I was waiting for things to get better, I spent even that little money I had. Because money doesn’t stay still, I spent it. Then I had no choice but to start working for a Croat. I worked like my father with machinery, producing... I worked there for about a year, then I started working as a driver delivering goods throughout Kosovo.

Anita Susuri: When you came back from France, did you continue with your profession or...

Memedali Gradina: No, no, commerce. No, I didn’t continue working in my profession, commerce was much better, there was more money in it.

Anita Susuri: How did that go? Did you buy the goods, did you...

Memedali Gradina: Yes, yes, we bought the goods. There were three big warehouses that would offer wholesale products, the Croats, of course. Croats would bring goods from China and stuff, they would bring the products. They would get wholesale, we would buy it from them and sell it in the market.

Anita Susuri: At some point, Croats processed plastic, metal then they began...

Memedali Gradina: Then they began to bring them from other countries... It was cheaper that way. Like after the war, for example, in Kosovo people rarely... for example, people who would produce small car toys, they would cost 1.20 euro, while others would buy it for 20 cents in China, that’s why production faded away.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember the time when Croats started leaving? In the ‘90s when Šešelj came, do you remember that day?

Memedali Gradina: Look, I was at the market, you know, to sell, I don’t know which day it was, no, I don’t know exactly, I can’t, I can’t know it. But when I returned from the market, I went to buy goods to prepare myself for tomorrow’s market day, I heard someone say at the center, “Šešelj was in Janjevo today.” I thought that was a joke, I couldn’t believe it, I said, “Stop it, Šešelj in Janjevo? What would he want in Janjevo? Even if he came to Janjevo,” I said, “He would not get out of here alive.” “Trust me!” My friends swore, “I swear he was here. He went walking up to the church.” He said, “He went up walking.” I did not believe them, “No, no way.” I said. They marched... they were called to go into military service, just like I avoided military service, so they avoided it by going to Croatia. Young people left.

Of course, what would parents do without their children? So they started to leave also, so only these people are left. I don’t think there are even ten families here in Janjevo, they’re probably ten-fifteen Croatian families, but the majority of Janjevo was Croatian. Janjevo was emptied because of Šešelj. I

know, I didn't see it, but people have told me that he had said some harsh words here, I didn't hear him, I didn't hear him with my own ears, but I heard that he said some harsh words and people left because they were scared.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember the time when they left, moved with trucks? Do you know what it was...

Memedali Gradina: Who came?

Anita Susuri: When Croats started to move out?

Memedali Gradina: We would help them. Trucks would come here, they would load them. Of course, how could they leave things there. Of course, if I were to leave tomorrow, I would also take my things, there's no money to buy others. We would take them, load the trucks, we would say goodbye as brothers. To this day, when they come to Janejvo... they come to Janjevo when there are different holidays. We hug them, there's no bad blood between us.

Anita Susuri: What's the atmosphere like when they come? Is it more lively?

Memedali Gradina: It is more lively, you can tell it's more lively. When they have holidays, when they come, you can see the center is more lively, they start singing, they... it's different, they also drink a little. Drinking [alcohol] is not allowed in our religion, but it is in theirs.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask you about the mosque. I remembered that there's the mosque and another building near the mosque, like an old house. Is it part of the mosque...

Memedali Gradina: In the yard of the mosque?

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Memedali Gradina: Yes, there's a building in the yard of the mosque. That building is for women. Women pray there, and behind, in the same place is where they wash the dead bodies.

Anita Susuri: Was it always there?

Memedali Gradina: No, recently... it was built by Turks, Turkey invested in it.

Anita Susuri: So, it used to be just the mosque? There was no...

Memedali Gradina: The mosque... there was another building actually, but a completely different place, like a small house. But it was removed, and the mosque was fixed. We put that building and children's toys there. Did you see the park that was created? There used to be a house there, but the mosque bought that land and demolished it, but a company from Turkey did all of that. Turks did that.

Anita Susuri: So, when the mosque was renovated, that building was replaced?

Memedali Gradina: Yes, yes it was.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask about market day on Fridays in Janjevo. What was the atmosphere like? Do you have any memories?

Memedali Gradina: There was a market here in Janjevo where they would sell whatever they brought. It wasn't a problem to send things back. Because here in Janjevo, as I said, it was like Little Paris. Croats were rich, Albanians also, but not like Croats, it was very rare for Croats to be poor, they were very rich.

And when they would come, for example, to sell, there were no problems, men would even go out to shop, women would do it. They would have enough money in their pockets and they would shop. The atmosphere, market day was like a wedding. Now there are three or four people at the market. It's doubtful you even sell those things you bring, because now there are shops everywhere and people shop in the shops.

Anita Susuri: Do you have any memories of what happened at the market, or something you heard about what happened at the market?

Memedali Gradina: No, I just remember that market day was like a wedding, or something like that. I wasn't interested in the market that much back then. My grandmother would go buy juice, of course, back then we didn't have money to buy meat, some peppers, some... beans, of course, if there was any money left for beans.

Anita Susuri: So, after Croats started to move away, after '90, what was life like in Janjevo? Did anything change?

Memedali Gradina: Look, life without Croats in Janjevo was blocked. We knew it was going to be blocked, because they were traders, they would go everywhere. So, they would go from the fifth month, and would come back in the tenth month, say, for five months, people from age 18 and up were away. They weren't home all summer long, they would work. When they came here, they would bring money with packages.

Anita Susuri: You said you started in Janjevo during the war, what was war like for you? Kosovo War.

Memedali Gradina: War for me... to be honest, I didn't believe they were going to bomb Kosovo. I said, "Why would they bomb?" But then I heard the news, "The planes left." Before they even finished, the electricity went off, the first bomb fell in Gračanica. When the electricity went off, I went out to my yard. I don't know if you believe me, I swear to God, I think I heard the ground from the bomb on my roof. I was scared, so I said, "Let's see what happens." But I tried to calm my children down, whatever

happens to us will happen to everyone. There's nothing we can do! We got inside, we all gathered in a room. We waited for it to stop, it just got worse. That's how they emptied Kosovo, not from us, but completely. But anyway, people started to come back.

Of course, at that time, I went to Pristina, my grandmother was sick, she was still alive, my grandfather wasn't. Anyway, from '80, I've always had a car. When I went to Pristina with my car to get some medicine, what did I see in Pristina? A disaster. I went to the bus station to look around. The bus station was, how do I say, there were so many people, as if it was a fair...

Anita Susuri: People moving?

Memedali Gradina: Waiting for buses to go. There weren't only Roma, or only Albanians, no, no. No one cared. They would just get on buses to leave, I don't even know where they went. Then, after a month of bombing, as I said, my brother said, "I can't take it," he said, "They don't plan on stopping. I have children, I don't want them to be terrified. I'm leaving."

And I didn't want to be the reason, to say, "Wait..." or something. "No problem, here is the money." He went to Italy, from Italy to Germany. When my second brother heard how easy it was for him to go to Germany, he said, "I will go too, because of the children." "No problem." I said, "Here's some money for you, too." He went too, I was left here with my children, mother and father, like this.

Anita Susuri: When Kosovo was freed, do you remember the day the war ended?

Memedali Gradina: Yes, yes. When Kosovo was freed, when Kosovo was freed after more than 60 days, first, I went to the center, the center of Janjevo. Because at first, I would go there, but then I was scared of the military that was here, and I didn't go out, I was scared. One of my friends was actually beaten by a Serbian policeman. I didn't go out for 62 days at all.

When I heard that NATO came, that British people came, I remember that day very well. We went out to the center and coffee shops with my friends and celebrated... I used to drink then, to be honest. Anyway, I've started *namaz*⁷ a few years ago, so I don't drink anymore. We went out to celebrate, so back then, we didn't have a problem. There were some little things in the neighborhood, now, we heard what they were doing in Pristina, they would throw a rock or something that was on the streets, Roma, they would break glass or something. But no big damage.

Anita Susuri: How did life continue after the war?

Memedali Gradina: It was normal, it was normal. After the war here in Janjevo, I'll tell you about Janjevo, but outside of Janjevo, well, we heard it was dangerous to go out. But, here in Janjevo... well, thanks to our Albanian brothers here, they protected us. Whoever came, they would say, "Don't bother

⁷ *Salah, Salaah or Salat* is the second of the Five Pillars in the Islamic faith, and an obligatory religious duty for every Muslim. It is a physical, mental, and spiritual act of worship that is observed five times every day at prescribed times.

the Roma, we know them. We grew up here, they didn't do anything. Look at those in Pristina, what they did."

Anita Susuri: What did you do after?

Memedali Gradina: Well, I was waiting, as I told my father, "Here it will be like in America." With the idea that it will be like Little America here, I didn't work for a year. We spent what we had, and that's it. Then after a year, first, my wife started working at the school. Then I started working for a Croat with the machines where production starts. My father would get around 250 euros from the Municipality of Lipjan since he was the Roma representative, so it was good. Then life started. My wife was working, I was working, my father was getting paid, it was good. Better than now. Because now only my wife works, we... then it started, it was good.

Anita Susuri: Now what do you do, how do you live?

Memedali Gradina: Now we live on the salary of my wife. This [the house] was built, it was built but now we can't even put a nail in it as they say, but what can we do? But it's God's will, like that. We have enough to drink and eat. The salary my wife gets, the retirement money my mother gets, my son is sick, we buy medicine for him worth 120 euros. Because of the illness he has, we can't leave him without his medicine.

Anita Susuri: What kind of illness is it? If you don't mind telling me.

Memedali Gradina: There's no reason to, Allah made him that way. He was well until 17, he was the best student in his class. But when he turned 18, his hand started to shake, then his other hand also, almost, some sort of paralysis. But, *alhamdulillah*, he stands on his two feet, he is a little sick...

Anita Susuri: I wanted to go back to the holiday, I forgot to ask you about Saint George's, I know it was celebrated here by everybody.

Memedali Gradina: Look, back then, Croats celebrated Saint George's first, we would go visit them. Then after a week, I think there was a one-week difference between their Saint George's and our Saint George's, then they would visit us. But back then, Saint George's wasn't celebrated at home, but we would build a tent and we would invite guests, they would invite us, we would invite them. Saint George's back then was a big holiday, but now God has brought us justice, I hope we keep that justice. Here in Janjevo, only two or three Roma houses celebrate it, or not? I don't celebrate any holidays since I started praying five times a day, of course. I only celebrate *Bajram*,⁸ nothing else.

Anita Susuri: When you celebrated Saint George's, did you celebrate it at the cinema or somewhere else?

⁸ *Bajram* is the Turkish word for festival. Albanians celebrate *Ramadan Bajram*, which is the same as *Eid*, and *Kurban Bajram*, which is the Day of Sacrifice, two months and ten days after *Ramadan Bajram*. On the day of *Eid*, there is no fasting.

Memedali Gradina: No, no. There, the music would come there. During the day, there was music, we would dance and stuff. But the celebrations, the celebrations at home, people would come home.

Anita Susuri: Were there any preparations for that day?

Memedali Gradina: Yes, yes, of course, we would cut and cook the lambs. Someone would do barbeque, *fli*,⁹ things like this. Of course, there were preparations and clothes, just like *Bajram* now. Saint George's, we would spend more money. We wouldn't even have money to buy cigarettes the next day, anyway...

Anita Susuri: Do you have anything to add? If... a memory or something?

Memedali Gradina: Well, a memory. What should I say? A memory, as I said, we had a good life back then, but we have to accept how things are now. I have some friends who want to start practicing religion. I say that most of my friends are blind and can't hear, it's the end, we are in front of the door about to get in. Because, look, there's no respect between father and son, or anyone.

When I was little, I didn't even dare say to someone who would ask me to buy them cigarettes, "No, I'm not going, I can't." Not because they would slap me, because that would happen, but I didn't dare go home if they told my father. I would be scared, I would wait for my father to sleep, after that, I would go in. While looking at the respect now, it's almost the end of the world. Allah keeps it from happening because of the little kids, they still don't know anything.

Anita Susuri: Thank you for your time.

⁹ A traditional dish in Albanian cuisine consisting of crepe-like layers baked with embers under a lid.