Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH MARK BASKIN

Pristina | Date: February 28 and 29, 2020
Duration: 178 minutes

Present:

1. Mark Baskin (Speaker)
2. Erëmirë Krasniqi (Interviewer)
3. Chester Eng (Notetaker)
4. Renea Begolli (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

[This part of the interview was conducted on February 28, 2020]

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay, Mark, can you introduce yourself, and maybe start from your earliest memories, what you remember?

Mark Baskin: So my name is Mark Baskin. I was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan, in the U.S. And among my earliest memories was living with my grandmother, who came over from Russia around 1910. And my grandfather died before I was born. But they were both active in the… what they called the *Jevrejski Bund*, or the Jewish Bund.[1] And then in the United States, they were in the *Arbeiter Ring*, which is the "Workmen's Circle."

And the Bund, their thing was to… they wanted cultural autonomy, and within the Russian Social Democratic Party. And, in 1903, when the Party split into Menshevik and Bolshevik, they sided with the Mensheviks. And, being active in the 1905 revolution, my grandfather was in Siberia, and he escaped and came and married… actually, they were never married. My grandparents were in a common-law marriage (laughs), and then they became very active in this.

And I think… I only learned long after they died, about 30 years ago, that they were members of the American Communist Party. And when I was a kid… so every morning, my grandmother would receive the morning Yiddish-language morning *Freiheit*, which means, you know, "the freedom," and that was the Yiddish-language Communist Party paper, and I never knew any of that.

[1] A secular Jewish socialist group active in the Russian Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that sought to unite Jewish workers into a united socialist party.

And so what I do remember as a kid was… because my parents were good FDR[2] New Deal[3] liberals, who believed that FDR should have been president forever. But my father had money in the stock market, and my grandmother would get mad at him for kind of engaging in capitalist endeavors and things like that. So I kind of remember that, but, you know, it was a loving family and everything, but there were those sorts of things. So Bubbe, as we called her, Bubbe was a… she was a strong influence when I was really young.

And so those were among my earliest memories. So I grew up in Oak Park [Michigan] in the 1950s and ‘60s. I became, given that kind of political background… it was very political. I remember my grandmother used to have this, they would call it *kruzhok* in Russian. *Kruzhok*, which is a reading circle, and they would come occasionally to our house, all these old people who'd come and speak Yiddish in our house.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were they close readings of text, or what were they?

Mark Baskin: They were reading these texts, and they were all in Yiddish, you know, from all these Yiddish socialists. You know, what's his name, Sholem Aleichem, who wrote the stories that led to the film *Fiddler on the Roof*… were taken from these stories by Sholem Aleichem, which were these kinds of left-wing stories and etcetera, etcetera. And they had long talks about this and that, and I remember going to these meetings.

They would have these concerts. My grandfather sang in the choir, so we would go to these choir concerts, which were… even when I first came to Yugoslavia in the 1970s, there were still lots of choirs. It was one of the ways that people gathered together here. And…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did they pass down Yiddish to you?

Mark Baskin: No, Yiddish was the language my parents spoke when they didn't want me to understand. My brother understood some of it. I *spreche a bisl* (laughs) Yiddish, but not very much, because, you know, Yiddish is like German and Hebrew and etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. And so I don't really know it. They wanted me to learn it.

And there were a few… my aunt spoke it fluently. She went all the way to *eydish shule*, as they say it, *eydish shule*, all the way through high school. And my parents had some friends who spoke it quite fluently. But I never did. And… and…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was family life? You mentioned you had brothers and sisters?

Mark Baskin: I have just one brother.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Ah.

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[2] Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the 32nd President of the United States.
[3] The wide-ranging domestic agenda enacted by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the United States between 1933 and 1939 in response to the Great Depression.

Mark Baskin: He's an old brother. And, in our family, we knew that we were going to college from the time we were still in my mother's womb (laughs), I suspect. And it was, you know, a typical American family of the '50s and '60s, you know, rather modest. We lived in a kind of middle-class suburb, and my parents were very active. In fact, when they were young, they were also activists. And…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was happening politically? Can you tell us?

Mark Baskin: Well, definitely the Civil Rights Movement[4] was the big deal. But I, among the stories that I heard, there was… being in Detroit, the labor organizing, and the creation of the United Auto Workers,[5] or UAW, was a big deal. And there was a close friend of my parents who was killed at a demonstration in, must have been in 1937, '38, and it was called the Battle of the Overpass, in which Henry Ford[6] hired gangsters to break up the demonstrators, to control the workers. And I know that my aunt had wanted to go to the demonstration, and then… and Zadie wouldn't let her (laughs), and then there our friend died. And I, and the guy who died, I actually know his brother and sons, they have now passed away, but I knew their family as well, as part of this community that we still belong to. And so politically what was happening was… I remember my first political memory was John F. Kennedy, the election of 1960.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How old were you then?

Mark Baskin: I was eight. And so that's what I vaguely remember. I remember I thought I liked the way Nixon looked, and I told that to my mother, and she was horrified (laughs). And so… and I, of course, later understood why she was horrified and all that. Although when I compare, well, Nixon looks good compared to some presidents, in fact (laughs), so… and so… But I remember the things with the Civil Rights Movement and, again, the aunt who spoke Yiddish, she went down to the march, the famous March on Washington in 1963, where Martin Luther King [Jr.] made his "I Have a Dream" speech. All of the kind of labor… she was a labor activist her whole life. She… her last act was she was at the… a couple of years before she died, she went to the 2008 [Democratic National] Convention where Obama spoke, you know, where Obama was nominated, and I asked her, "How was it?" And she goes, "I liked Michelle [Obama]'s speech better," (laughs), she said. That was her line.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was this alliance common at the time, that the Jewish community would ally with the black community?

Mark Baskin: Yes.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay.

Mark Baskin: Jews were, the Jewish community, well, not the entire Jewish community, but basically, since the… Actually, I gave a talk in Serbian on this in Belgrade about ten or fifteen years ago, about the Jewish interests in the election, so I looked up, since the 1920s, Jews have voted about 65 or more

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[4] The social and political movement by African Americans to end racial discrimination, segregation, and disenfranchisement in the United States between 1954 and 1968.
[5] The American labor union founded and headquartered in Detroit known for securing high wages and pensions for auto workers.
[6] The founder and leader of the Ford Motor Company.

percent for the Democrats, 65 to 70 percent for the Democrats. And, you know, there's this whole common heritage, you know, this idea that we were once slaves in the land of Egypt, that this… Jews, wherever they have been, with the exception of Israel since 1948,[7] we've been a minority, so that we always take steps to sort of… we believe in… I was raised thinking that the underdog was worth supporting.

So the first thing that I did was I went and demonstrated for farmworkers, Hispanic farmworkers who were unionizing in the 1960s, Cesar Chavez[8] {points at Chester Eng}. For years, I didn't eat grapes. We boycotted grapes (laughs) because they were picking grapes, and it was… I can tell you it was a sacrifice because I love grapes (laughs). And I remember helping them build houses in Michigan because there were Hispanic workers all over the place. So…

Yeah, and so I became an activist, and then the war in Vietnam, so then I was among the student leaders at my high school. Also, to, kind of… for student power, more student rights, that we could go out, we could leave the building for lunch, we could do all of these kinds of things. And, at the same time, the same group of people that we… I remember, in 1969, we made a deal with the principal, that the students could skip and go to a big demonstration that was taking place in downtown Detroit, so that, early on, I was active against the war.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was Oak Park close?

Mark Baskin: Oak Park bordered right on {draws a horizontal line with his right hand}.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us more about that town? What was it like?

Mark Baskin: Oak Park… I can't believe I remember this. I don't know how many people there are now, but it had 37,000 people. It was a kind of… you know, it was a suburb. It bordered with Detroit. I was a couple of miles north of there. It was probably… it was… we used to refer to it as Little Israel. It was the (laughs)… it was a… you know, there were two big Jewish suburbs… not that… Oak Park and Southfield. And Southfield was a little wealthier, so we called it the "Golden Ghetto" (laughs). We Jews did. But Oak Park was our, we would say with our fake Yiddish, *Oak Park* (with throaty accent), we'd call it (laughs).

And so the school system… the school I went to was probably about 70 percent Jewish. And…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you explain why so many Jewish families moved to Oak Park?

Mark Baskin: Because there was discrimination against Jews. There were positive and negative reasons. Positively, there were discriminations… negatively, there were discriminations against Jews. There were places in the Detroit area where they would not sell to Jewish people because we were Jews. Because… and if you look at some of the Ku Klux Klan, the right-wing fascist, quasi-fascist, whatever you want to call, thing… they almost… they despised Jews more than they do African-Americans.

[7] The year of the declaration of the establishment of the State of Israel.
[8] The Mexican-American civil rights activist and labor movement leader who organized strikes among farmworkers in the 1960s.

And these demonstrations that took place in Charlottesville in 2017,[9] I think it was. These Nazi, American Nazi demostrators were screaming, doing the "Sieg Heil" {raises his right arm with a straightened hand}, they were going "Jews will not replace us," "Jews will not replace us." A former Klan leader named David Duke, who's run for Congress a few times, has a podcast where he spends more time demeaning the Jews than he does African-Americans.

And so there's this idea that Jews, wherever they've been… and that's not unique to the United States; it's all over. Jews have always been in this position of being a middleman minority. You know, in Eastern Europe, we were kicked… Jews have always been advisers to the court in Spain, in Egypt, and then we get kicked out. And then, when we got kicked out of Spain, we came to the Balkans. So there's, you know, the Jewish community that's in Prizren and that's here came, and what that, there's a much larger Jewish community in Sarajevo. In Sarajevo, 20 percent of the population in 1940 was Jewish.

And so in… at any rate, so there was that kind of antisemitism. And, by the same token, you're also in your community, you're forced to live in a ghetto, or *shtetl* in Yiddish. You know, and so you… people just moved to be with their communities. And, so if you look now, contemporary to the United States, Jews have dispersed. They're no longer all over.

In the little neighborhood where I lived… we sold our house about 10 years ago… it's become sort of like the Borough Park[10] of Detroit, you know, really Orthodox, super Jewish. They don't drive on weekends. They just go to synagogue, you know, the ones with the long *payos* {twists fingers along his cheekbones}, you know, the long sideburns[11] and the {puts his hand over head to represent a *yarmulke*}.[12] They wear these long black coats. And we made fun of them. And they made fun of us. You know, we get along fine.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was school with 70 percent Jews?

Mark Baskin: We were all… at that time, we were all liberal Jews, you know, so it was fine. You know, it was fine. As I was telling someone yesterday, I said, "There were two kinds of Jews: there were businessmen and rabbis. The businessmen all became rich, and the rabbis {throws hands up}." Well, I'm a rabbi in that sense (laughs). No, I mean, you know, there was… I went to school with… for example, there were some really significant people who went to my school. Almost anybody can say that. Jeffrey Sachs, the economist, was a couple of years younger than me. His older sister was one of my closest friends. She was a reporter for *Time* magazine for many years.

Don Was, who is now the president of Blue Note Records. He was a… he produced The Rolling Stones. He's won many Grammy Awards. Don was a good friend of mine in high school. And there were others as well who are maybe less famous. Don is like real Hollywood, so he's well-known, hangs out with

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[9] The white supremacist and neo-Nazi rallies that took place in this city in central Virginia, a state in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, on August 11 and 12, 2017.
[10] The neighborhood in southwestern Brooklyn, in New York City, that is home to one of the largest Orthodox Jewish communities outside Israel.
[11] Long-curled sidelocks worn by some Orthdox Jewish men and boys based on an interpretation of the command in the Torah that forbids shaving the "corners" of the head.
[12] The skullcap Orthodox Jewish men wear in public and other Jewish men wear during prayer.

Leonard Cohen… or hung out with Leonard Cohen and that crowd, whereas, and, Jeff is Jeff, you know, and he speaks-from-the-ex-cathedra, Jeff.

So it was fine going to school. I mean, you know, we… so what it meant in my school system is that we did not go to school officially on Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah is the New Year, the Jewish New Year. It's usually in the fall, September sometime. And Yom Kippur, which is the high holy day, which is sort of similar to Ramadan, but it's only one day where you fast, and it's the day where you atone for all your sins. Those were days, which I never celebrated because I come from this left-wing family, and we never did, but we didn't… so, for us, it was a day off from school (laughs).

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were they atheists as well, your parents?

Mark Baskin: Oh yeah.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: (laughs)

Mark Baskin: Oh yeah, no, no, I mean, God is… you know, all that Marxist stuff on God. You know, right? I mean, right? And I remember I said to my parents when I was about eleven, because at thirteen, a Jewish child, or a Jewish man… Now, it's actually boys and girls who go through a ritual called a bar mitzvah, which is a ritual of becoming an adult, and I didn't have a bar mitzvah. I went to a kind of secular Sunday school, where, you know, [students came] from families similar to my family. But all of my friends would go to Hebrew school three days a week, where they'd learn Hebrew and they'd learn the prayers that they were to say at their bar mitzvah because, at your bar mitzvah, what you do is… have you ever been to a bar mitzvah? {points at Erëmirë Krasniqi}

Erëmirë Krasniqi: No.

Mark Baskin: You should. If you have any Jewish friends in the States when they have kid, you should, because it's a…

Chester Eng: It's an experience.

Mark Baskin: It's, it's actually, it's now it's kind of like going to a wedding here in a lot of ways, you know. It's just way over the top {stretches arms to the sides to form a semicircle}. When I was a kid, it wasn't over the top at all. And, you know, but the key thing is that you as a young boy lead the service, and you read part of the Torah and then you read other stuff, and you lead the service, and your family comes up, and, you know…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you feel singled out?

Mark Baskin: Well, I did. So I asked my parents… I asked my parents, and… of the two things that I remember politically… we shouldn't go on, I suppose. One was, I asked my parents, "Can I have a bar mitzvah?" because my two or three closest friends already had a bar mitzvah. And then they explained to me that we don't believe in this, this is not what was… this was like Trotsky[13] by the way. I mean, I

[13] The Soviet Marxist theorist and revolutionary who helped organize the 1917 October Revolution in Russia and then became a leader in the Soviet Communist Party.

later studied Russian history, and Trotsky was a Jew who was raised outside of the pale. He was not raised… so that he was discriminated [against] for being a Jew by the Russians, and he was discriminated by the Jews for not… for being outside. So that's how I kind of felt. This is what political scientists were calling "double alienation," or something like that.

And then I, the other time was I remember coming after dinner one night, I said to my mother, I said, "You know, Ma, if there were no Communists in the world, everything would be really great." And she just said to me, in Yiddish, she goes, "*Az och un vey*," which is, you know, {slaps his forehead}. She goes, "Mark, you know, Bubbe's a Communist," (laughs). And…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you come up with that sentence?

Mark Baskin: Oh, because my teacher, because of the things that we were learning in school. We were learning, you know, this was 1960, it was the Cold War, you know, anti-Communist stuff, we hated the Communists, so that's why I said that. I mean, when you're eight years old, you know, unless you're a genius, you don't really come up with your own ideas. And so those were two things that I really remember. And I asked my mom, who had dementia at the end of her life, if she remembered that exchange and she did not (laughs), but I remember it really clearly.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you maybe talk about that climate in the U.S. in those years, like the whole… even school, education, was preaching against Communism? Because it was a pretty polarizing discussion.

Mark Baskin: Well, no, I mean, again, we were at a pretty particular kind of school {drinks water}. You know, we all said our Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, blah, blah, blah. And I believe we said, "One nation under God." That was not an issue. I went to a Jewish school.

So this is what America was like then. We were integrating into… we were integrated into America. We just were liberals. That, as Jews, we sang Christmas carols every Christmas. They're beautiful songs. I had no problem. I still have no problem singing Christmas carols. To me, I don't feel like it's offending my own identity, that I have to sing this Christian music, you know, "Silent Night," "Good King Wenceslas," you know all of those songs {points at Chester Eng}. And so…

So, but out there politically, there were things, and I… my parents told me that there were… that they had friends who had suffered, you know, during the McCarthy period.[14] And I later met people who had, and so there was that. But, you know, when you're eight years old, that doesn't affect you, or even at ten years old that doesn't affect you.

I remember going to school in October 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis, thinking, "We might get bombed" (laughs). So, you know, there was… so we were good Americans. And the thing about the Left in the '60s… when you think about… unless you were really a Communist left, the thing about the Left, the idea is that American provided an absolutely magnificent framework to give rights to everybody, and we just need to realize that everyone has those rights. So this meant African

[14] The era of widespread fear of Communist influence on institutions and of Soviet spying in the United States from the late 1940s through the 1950s, during which Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy rose to prominence by claiming that Communism had infiltrated the U.S. government, academia, and film industry.

Americans, this meant… there weren't issues with Hispanics at that time, or with Muslims, or you know… we were much more homogeneous. We were still diverse, but we were much more homogeneous at the time. And so…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What happened next? Like…

Mark Baskin: So, go ahead.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: High school life? How did you get out of Oak Park?

Mark Baskin: Well, I became real countercultural. I left the sort of straight line. I began, you know, following rock and roll and jazz music and various other things, not all of which were entirely 100 percent legal at the time (laughs). And…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yeah, what was happening in the culture? Who was famous at the time (laughs)? We might know.

Mark Baskin: So, I used to go to a… you know, my parents wanted my brother and me to be musicians, classical musicians.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Oh.

Mark Baskin: My brother is a classical musician.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You guys have it in the family?

Mark Baskin: No

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay.

Mark Baskin: Not particularly, but they wanted us, and so we had, I had music lessons from the time I was really young. I… but I didn't like to practice (laughs), and… so, you know, the joke is "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?[15] Right, practice," you know. So my brother did, and he's principal oboist to the Montreal Symphony. And so I didn't, and I kind of had a much longer path to becoming an academic. And becoming an academic was okay, as far as my parents were concerned. They were very, they were satisfied with that. They thought that I might have been dead otherwise, so they were happy that I survived and made it to that. So, you know, at the time…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What instrument did you play?

Mark Baskin: I played, first, I took piano lessons, and then I played French horn.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Ah, okay.

[15] The prominent concert hall in Midtown Manhattan in New York City.

Mark Baskin: Yeah, horn's a hard instrument. And I just didn't like it. And I just didn't like to practice. I didn't have the *Sitzfleisch*, as we say in Yiddish, to sit down and do it. I would rather go out and play baseball or football or something. But, at the time… so, you know, when I came of age, the… also, *West Side Story*, you know, the play that was taken from *Romeo and Juliet* about the Capulets against the… {pointing at interviewers}

Erëmirë Krasniqi: The Montagues.

Chester Eng: The Montagues.

Mark Baskin:… the Montagues, which is also a kind of ethnic sort of thing in a way. And in *West Side Story*, it was the Puerto Ricans against the whites, who the whites were… probably Irish. But then in the culture, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Jefferson Plane, I remember. Let me think, Grateful Dead. I mean, I knew people that were just constantly taking LSD and smoking dope, and they would travel with the Grateful Dead and just go to 30 or 40 or 50 concerts a year with them. And it was a real cult sort of thing. This was also the age of Manson. There was a movie last year that was, it was really a good film. My kids didn't like it, but it was a good film about *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, which kind of captured that era really nicely. So… And then, so, then when I went off to college, I spent a year or two very happy that I wasn't living at home anymore. And then I became, we became, I joined this radical movement.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What school did you go to?

Mark Baskin: I went to a school that people in Kosovo know pretty well actually, Oakland University. There are many people who… I met some people at the Philosophy Faculty and at the Engineering Faculty who had done, you know… I don't know, they had fellowships there and stuff.

But it was, I didn't want to go to college and I told my parents, I said, "I don't want to go to college," and they said, "Okay, you can start paying rent." And I said, "Okay, college looks good," (laughs). So I went to college. And I wasn't a very good student in high school, so I went… and I could get into Oakland, and I went. And then I, you know, I fell in with a group and we became, we took over the student government, and we had a radical newspaper, and we were calling for a revolution at one time. The faculty went on strike, so we took over the dorms, and all this. And it was…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What were your demands? What were you organizing for?

Mark Baskin: We wanted student power. I can't even remember. Really, I can't even remember. Student power. All I remember is that we… I was really into jazz at the time, so we were listening to bebop instead of Led Zeppelin (laughs) when we were striking. And so… And then, when that came to an end, when that…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What were you studying? Can you tell us?

Mark Baskin: Then I went, I wasn't studying anything at the time. I mean…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What kind of courses?

Mark Baskin: Oh yeah, at the time, I was a psych major, but I didn't like psych, so then I studied history. And then I began studying. And my grandmother was quite old at the time, but… and she was already senile. I couldn't really talk to her, but I was really interested in the revolutionary, and I was trying to be a revolutionary and all that. So I began studying Russian revolutionary history, and then my professor who I really, who was kind of my mentor as an undergrad was actually a medieval historian. So I went back and I took all these courses on kind of early Russian history, which were really interesting I have to say. And then, so I graduated with a degree in history.

And then, when I graduated, I wanted to get out of the United States. I felt it was really stifling and all this. And I just, so I applied for a little Fulbright to come to Yugoslavia because there was nothing to do in the Soviet Union. Another one of my mentors who was an Indiana[16] Ph.D. in history. He was a Habsburgist. He was a guy who did Poland, and he wrote an article called (laughs) "Did the Slavs Speak German at the First Pan-Slavic Congress?" And it turns out that they did because it was the language within the Habsburg monarchy everyone spoke.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So that's what happened?

Mark Baskin: Yeah, yeah, so all the Slavs, you know, all the Poles, the Czechs, the Slovaks, the… all these that were at the time in 1848 developing their cultures, instead of the Croats, and the Serbs, and all them.

[The story continues in part two]

Part Two

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were you at the time able to apply for Fulbright in Russia?

Mark Baskin: No, so I applied to study the National Question, and I didn't even make it out of the Oakland competition. I had a bit of a reputation because of my earlier… and, I, you know… but in doing my research, I learned about a program that was run from Macalester College,[17] where Kofi Annan,[18] Humbert Humphrey[19] went there, in St. Paul, Minnesota, ran in Zagreb, to study Russian for a year. So I went to that program.

And there we had one program to study in Leningrad, but my Russian wasn't nearly… you really needed to have good Russian. There were mainly graduate students in that program. So I went. They just demanded you be healthy to go to this program essentially and have a little bit of Russian. I got in. It was… and I spent a year in Zagreb studying Russian. But also, being interested in history, I listened to lectures from really great historians from the Zagreb Philosophy Faculty: Mirjana Gross, Jaroslav

[16] Indiana University Bloomington, a large research university in the Midwest region of the United States.
[17] A private small liberal arts college in Saint Paul, Minnesota, in the Upper Midwest region of the United States.
[18] The Ghanaian diplomat who is best known as the United Nations Secretary-General from 1997 to 2006.
[19] Politician from Minnesota who served as Vice President of the United States and represented his home state in the United States Senate.

Šidak, and Ljubo Boban, who were all sort of major figures not just in Yugoslavia but globally who were well-known. And…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was Yugoslavia in the '70s?

Mark Baskin: It was… you know, it was so much different than now studying abroad. I didn't speak to my parents for a year. I wrote two letters a week. They wrote me two letters a week. I asked my parents to cut out… you know the comic strip *Doonesbury*?[20] Do they still have it? At the time, there was this… my mother cut out *Doonesbury* every day and sent it to me and sent it like once a month. They would send me *Doonesbury*.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How long would it take to receive a letter?

Mark Baskin: A week, ten days. Not too bad.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: It was simple (chuckles).

Mark Baskin: You know, if you wanted to call home, you had to go to the post office. It was expensive, and so I never did. You know, we just wrote all the time. And it was… it a well-functioning state. This was, you know, you go back having then studied very carefully… This was the period of what they say in Croatian, the *Hrvatsko Šutnja* [Croatian Silence], everything that was after 1971, the purges, and everything was quiet, so politically there wasn't anything going on.

I studied really hard that year because I wanted to go to graduate school and I wanted to already know my Russian. So I studied really hard in Russian, and I worked really hard to learn Croatian, or Croatian or Serbian as they called it there in Zagreb.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How long did you stay?

Mark Baskin: A year.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: A year.

Mark Baskin: A little more like ten months. You know, I came in September, and I left at the end of July.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How were your days? What did you do? How was life?

Mark Baskin: I ate a *burek*[21] every day. I had a *burek sa sirom*,[22] as they say, every day *me djathë*[23] (laughs), every day.

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[20] A syndicated daily comic strip launched in 1970 well-known for its liberal political and social commentary.
[21] 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.
[22] Croatian: "Burek with feta"
[23] Alb., "with feta"

Erëmirë Krasniqi: *Me djathë*?

Mark Baskin: *Me djathë*, uh huh. And I, you know, I would go to the Faculty. I'd take my classes. I had a girlfriend. Thanks to her, and she spoke English quite well, but I didn't know that for the first couple of months. She only spoke Croatian with me. And she was the *demonstrator*[24] for Šidak, who was like the senior faculty, you know, the senior guy. Šidak was already an old man. Great lecturer.

And… I… so this is what Yugoslavia was like at the time. I met a guy who was a jazz critic, and I was really into jazz, and so we really hit it off. And in a few weeks, he says, "Listen, I'm going to the Belgrade Jazz Festival. You should come." And so I went. And I skipped a week of class, and they thought I was going to become a real… there had been a guy the year before that basically just used Zagreb as a, you know, departure point to travel.

And so I went for a week to Belgrade, and I was hanging out with all the jazz critics, going backstage, going to all the press conferences. And they were interviewing. They had great musicians. Charles Mingus was there.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Really?

Mark Baskin: Yeah, I mean, they had really… it was great. And then when I went, there was a Russian jazz piano player named Igor Brila who was brilliant. An avant-garde, he was fantastic. And so I went to all the press conferences. And the critics, you know, they were all kind of students of sociology and stuff, and they asked these long questions about culture. And these musicians, most of whom, you know, were articulate but they couldn't understand or anything like that. And they were just at a different level. They were not… and so it was being televised by Yugoslav television. And…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: The press conference?

Mark Baskin: Not the press conference. The concerts.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Really?

Mark Baskin: Yeah, the concerts, they were all broadcast by Yugoslav television. And they wanted someone to interview the musicians for like a minute and a half or so when they came off the stage. And they just said, "We need someone who they can understand," so they turned to me (laughs). And so I interviewed all of these jazz musicians when they came off the stage at the Belgrade Jazz Festival in 1975.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Oh my god.

Mark Baskin: And I remember… I want to tell one story. I was… there was a Finnish jazz piano player who I didn't like, and so the question I asked him… I'll say this… the question I said, you know, I said, "Some people say that white people really shouldn't be playing jazz. What do you think?" (laughs) {extends his right hand forward as if he were holding a microphone}. And he gave a great answer. He did. The answer he gave was very… he gave a great answer.

[24] Lecturer's assistant

And then when Mingus came off… and I had already talked to Mingus because Mingus was one of my heroes. And I told him how much he meant to me, and he just sat there. And he was this really totally weird guy, Mingus, he was just sitting there {imitates Mingus sitting still with him armed folded}. Then when he came off stage, I said what a fantastic set with his long-time {draws a circle with his right index finger}. I said {holds up right hand as if he is speaking into a microphone}, "Mr. Mingus, what is your message to the people of Yugoslavia?" And then he looked and he laughed and he said, "Get rich!" (laughs).

So it was… so that's what Yugoslavia was like. It was kind of like… you know, I know I met later, many years later, the Belgrade film director Srđan Karanović, who was a great director. And Đinđić said, he said, he says, "You know, Son, we just used to… *hajde da napravimo sranje.*" You know, "Let's just put some bullshit together, right? Let's just throw it all together." And so there was this great improvisatory quality. And so, to the extent that you were not threatening anyone in power and stuff, there were a lot of things you could do. And that's what I found.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And you said this was 1965?

Mark Baskin: '75, '75.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay.

Mark Baskin: Yeah, '65 it would have been a little too early for that. '65 would have been a little too early for that.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I wanted to double-check.

Mark Baskin: Yeah, '75.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: That's great.

Mark Baskin: Yeah, I had an absolutely fantastic time. And then I kept coming back. And then I went to graduate school, and there were these opportunities for IREX. IREX was the… they were… now, IREX has all these projects, development projects all over. But at the time, what IREX did was they handled all the… most of the exchanges with Communist countries, at least in Eastern Europe. And so there was an IREX program to spend a month in Bulgaria for (Incomp. 8:13), to study Bulgarian. So I went, and I just thought it was a way… I couldn't afford to go to Yugoslavia and anything like that, so they paid my way. And I had always traveled through Zagreb, and I did that one year. And then I went back and did my…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What were you studying in grad school?

Mark Baskin: So I started off in a multidisciplinary Soviet-East European program. And I wanted to go to history, but there were very few jobs in history. The job market in history has been bad since about… since like 1960, I think, you know.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: That's too bad.

Mark Baskin: And so I took a class from a political scientist, and he said, "You should, you know, do political science instead." And so I chose political science, and so I then did that. And then I was ghettoized. This was kind of Communist because we… our methods and stuff were different because, at the University of Michigan, a very quantitative positivistic school, you know, and so that… a lot of survey research. The Michigan department is a great department, but it's known for its electoral studies, which is done with all the surveys and stuff. You couldn't do any of that in Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union, so I just…

And so I began studying the National Question, issues of the National Question. And the approach that I took was one that didn't look at how does nationality affect behavior, but it was how does the state shape nationality. And so then I wrote this long paper looking at and comparing Macedonians to Muslims at the time, *Muslimani*, later the Bosniaks. And my argument was that… actually, in socialist Yugoslavia, which is very clearly non-nationalist, they have helped to shape, for really rational reasons, the development of these national communities. And, in many ways, they did. In Macedonia, clearly. And in the Muslims as well, because the Muslims did not… when they were … in '53, they didn't declare themselves as Yugoslavs, Serbs, or Croats. They said that they were Other. And then it was… over time, you know, they were allowed to declare themselves as *Muslimani*, and then you had this elite that emerged, etcetera, etcetera.

And so then my advisor said… well, this must have been in 1979… he said, "So why don't you do Kosovo?"

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Really?

Mark Baskin: Yeah, he said, "Why don't you look at… "… he said, "This is all really interesting. Why don't you do Kosovo?" So I wrote a paper…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you know where that was?

Mark Baskin: Yeah, yeah, of course, I did. No, no, I mean, I'd been in Yugoslavia.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay, were you traveling while you were here? I mean, you mentioned Belgrade, but were you going around?

Mark Baskin: In '75, I went to Bosnia. I spent time in Slovenia, of course. I never made it to Macedonia. I didn't get that far down. And Belgrade. And then time on the coast. And, of course, but, yeah, yeah, it was nice. But I prefer Korčula to Dubrovnik. Actually, it was much nicer, you know, in a lot of ways. And, yeah, I didn't go to Istria. It was only in '82 when I was back doing my doctoral research that I spent time there. And that's when I went everywhere. And I have to say, I went to every republic and autonomous province in Yugoslavia, but that was after I wrote my piece.

So I wrote a piece about… because, you know, in doing my work, my undergraduate thesis was about the development of Croatian nationalism until 1848. So I wrote all about the Illyrian movement and all this kind of stuff. And then there was an article… who wrote it? I can't remember the guy, a volume

edited by Peter Sugar from the University of Washington on the National Question in Eastern Europe. And I remember reading the chapter on Yugoslavia, and it was comprehensive. It covered everything. And so…

So I wrote… I ended up writing… he told me… it was probably in '80 or '81, because then I wrote a piece about the demonstrations in 1981.[25] And then it was later… it was my first published article in a journal, which published in a journal called *Problems with Communism*, published in '83 while I was doing my doctoral research.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: We'll return to that. Yeah, it's a big topic.

Mark Baskin: Yeah, and so I…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So tell me about Kosovo when your mentor said…

Mark Baskin: So, I, you know, and so what I did at the time, you know, it was pre-Internet, so there were two ways, three ways, sources of information if you wanted something on current events, because… one was Yugoslav newspapers, and Yugoslav, we subscribed to all of them at Michigan. But they came like six weeks, eight weeks late. You know, so to read, I don't know if we got *Rilindja*,[26] so, but we did get, you know, *NIN*.[27] And we got *VUS*[28] at the time, I think. I don't think… that was before *Danas*,[29] I think maybe *Danas*… but it [*VUS*] was the Zagreb weekly. And then, of course, *Politika*[30] and *Borba*.[31] *Borba* was a good source, but a very, you know {makes a fist}… with a clear perspective, I would say. Less nationalistic though than *Politika*, as I look back.

And then there was this… there was this thing called FBIS, Federal Broadcast Information Service. And they would come within just four to five days, and these were translations of the press that were done by the United States Government that were then distributed to everybody. And so we received them. They were rather inexpensive, too much for a graduate student, but my advisor got them. And then we got them in the library as well. And I think the Russian center also got them, so I had three different sources to get them. So that's where you'd find out what's going on. So those were the sources of information. And…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was the…

Mark Baskin: And Michigan was a great place to do this because there was an anthropologist who had done his work in Bosnia, had done fieldwork in Bosnia, and his wife was a folklorist who had done her

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[25] The student protest in Pristina in March and April of 1981.

[26] *Rilindja*, the first newspaper in Albanian language in Yugoslavia, initially printed in 1945 as a weekly newspaper.

[27] *Nedeljne informativne novine*, roughly meaning "Weekly Informational Newspaper," a Belgrade news magazine.

[28] *Vjesnik u srijedu*, the widely-read Wednesday edition of *Vjesnik* ("Journal"), a state-owned daily newspaper published in Zagreb.

[29] Serbian for "today," a left-leaning independent daily published in Belgrade starting in 1997.

[30] Serbian for "politics," Serbia's oldest continuously published daily newspaper, published in Belgrade.

[31] Serbian for "combat" or "struggle," a Serbian newspaper that was the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia.

work in Bosnia in the '60s in an area near Bugojno. And the medieval historian who was… I became really good… John Fine, his wife was from Svetozarevo, or now Jagodina. But she ended up going to Brandeis[32] as an undergrad. And Gena, but Gena had lots of contacts in her… so there was a large kind of Balkan community, relatively, at Michigan. To do what I did, the only other place I would have rather… might have been… would have been Berkeley.[33] But later, talking to people who went to Berkeley, I was really glad I went to Michigan. I mean, at Michigan, everyone got along, the professors all got along pretty well. And…

You know, like… you've been, you know, there's always places where academic squabbles are huge in the United States that are based on nothing and all this. There was a bit of that between say the language-literature people and the social scientists. But within history and… and they didn't involve the graduate students in any of the conflicts, and so for me it was just like being in heaven (laughs) in a lot of ways.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was Kosovo depicted at the time in the news that you had access to?

Mark Baskin: I'll send you my article if you want.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I mean, just…

Mark Baskin: Kosovo was seen as… there was a problem of integrating Kosovo into Yugoslavia on every level: economically, socially, and culturally, and politically. And, I, in the article I wrote, you could see the rise of a middle… ethnically Albanian middle class after the amendments of '68.[34] And you could sort of see the growth of ethnic Albanians working in the social sector, the growth in the percentage of Party members for ethnic Albanians. And, you know, even today, when you meet people of the older generation, they all speak Serbian quite fluently, etcetera, etcetera. And so they were really part of the system and part of the regime in many ways.

And in Kosovo, similar to Croatia, although more extreme, there was a lot more opposition, and there were people, so that you have a lot of political prisoners and stuff like that. That sort of stuff. But, I mean, overall, it was just seen as, you know, high birth rate was a problem, you know. And no matter how much investment went into Kosovo from these federal funds and how much growth there was, the per capita growth was not so great because of the high birth rate. And so, in many ways, it was not seen as fully integrated.

And I didn't realize how inaccurate that was, or how that was inaccurate, until I came here for the first time in '99… the first time I actually spent time in Kosovo was in '99… because, what I found is that, I had friends who studied in Zagreb… you meet all these people who go to study in Sarajevo and in Belgrade and in Skopje. And so that in many ways Kosovo was part of this Yugoslav system. And that… I mean, it's one thing that if you were, of course, rural, you know, then you were not necessarily. You were… it was some kind of dual system in that sense, but people that were urban, people… and that…

[32] A private research university in the greater Boston area.
[33] The best-known and most prestigious campus of the University of California system.
[34] Changes to the Yugoslav Constitution that granted Kosovo more rights and autonomy.

I mean, in the case of my friend Bashkim, I think my two friends who went to go study political science in Zagreb, I don't think they were… their parents were family members, although one was a brother of Orhan Nevzati. I don't know if you know Orhan. Orhan Nevzati was… he was on the Central Committee with Mikasić in the late '60s, and he was purged when Mikasić was. And then later Orhan… I think he lives in Belgrade now, but he's from Prizren.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Have you met Albanians while you were in Zagreb? Like the kind…

Mark Baskin: In '89 I did.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In '89.

Mark Baskin: I met Vevi. There was this guy that owned a restaurant that went from what was a Chinese restaurant to an Argentine steakhouse, and that was the first time I had Kosovo wine. They had Orvi… they had wine I was drinking, because it was great wine and it was cheap. You know, even during Communist times, it was also less expensive than, you know, Graš, Graševina, you know, those Croatian wines, and so it was quite good. Anyways, I mean, these people were… so there many ways in which they were, but, you know, there were… of course, in the end, it didn't work, especially after Tito died, and all that stuff.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: To return to that '81 article, how difficult was it to write something about '81 because not much information was available?

Mark Baskin: Oh, you'd be surprised.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay.

Mark Baskin: There was a lot. Really, in the press it was all there. I'll show you. I mean, I'll send you the article.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Because today you can hardly find an image of the protesters. It was really controlled the way…

Mark Baskin: My article was not about the people. It was… the question I was asking in the article, and the journal was one that was published by the State Department, although it was an academic journal. It was "Can the regime reestablish some kind of legitimate order?" And so it was looking at what are the prospects for Kosovo. And so… and it was easy to find out all about the demonstrations, you know, "*Trepča, Trepča Radi, Beograd Gradi*," you know, that kind of stuff. And it was easy to find all that sort of stuff, and then you'd read things that were condemning nationalism, but then you'd find information on what was really going on.

That when, apparently when… I guess it was Partizan,[35] or *Zvezda*,[36] came down and played the Prishtina football team, and everyone was screaming "EHO, EHO". So, you know, and they were condemning all of that, but then you see that really happens. So that was… I mean, so that's what I

[35] Partizan Football Club from Belgrade.
[36] Serbian for "star," referring to the Red Star Belgrade football club.

was… I wasn't doing… you know, the work that what's her face did, the Norwegian anthropologist in… near Peja. Do you know what I'm talking? Robert Elsie[37] published that book. It's excellent.

[The story continues in part three]

Part Three

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So we were talking about Berit Backer, right?

Mark Baskin: I'm just saying what I did was not the kind of thing that she did. She went and lived there and did this, and I was not talking about the way people lived. I was really looking at whether the regime could get its act together and reestablish order, and I ended up kind of (pauses) pessimistically positive (smiles). Well, I didn't… I mean, as you look at it, again I'm looking back… as you look at it, it didn't work very well, and there should… it would be good to have some histories that look at the role of ethnic Serb leaders, for example, even after 1974 here, because people have told me things since I have been back. They said, "Well, you know, yeah, everything was changing, but there were still Serbs. We always looked… the Serbs were calling the shots." And I don't know if that was the case or not. I heard that in Croatia as well. And it would be really quite interesting to look at, even before 1981, and then especially between '81 and '90, to look at how things evolved.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was the attitude of the U.S. towards Yugoslavia? Did it kind of include it within that view that it had for Eastern Europe as Communist?

Mark Baskin: It depends who you talk to.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Or how liberated was it from that general perception?

Mark Baskin: You know, if you talked to anyone who knew anything, it was not part of the [Soviet] Bloc. In the general popular perception, it was a Communist country and pretty horrible. And there were a lot of refugees after World War II, anti-Communist types, and so were very anti-Yugoslav. And…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did that find a place in… that perception, did that find a place in academia? That's what I'm saying. Were you…

Mark Baskin: Oh, in academia, no. In academia, Yugoslavia was kind of cool and interesting, I mean, on many different levels. I mean, that there was… we saw, and I believe that there was a real effort. For example, Brotherhood and Unity was not just a slogan, but that was a real effort to find a way in which people could have multiple sets of identities, etcetera, etcetera.

Branko Horvat was nominated for a Nobel Prize for his work on self-management. People like Tea Petrin, his student, and Aleš Vahčič, her husband, were at Cornell.[38] I think Tea did her doctorate at

[37] A Canadian scholar who specialized in Albanian studies.
[38] The private research university in Ithaca, New York.

Cornell when Branko was there. There was this real effort to do that, the Praxis School.[39] I mean Yugoslavia was seen as this kind of a third way that could possibly work. And, in the end, it didn't for all kinds of really bad reasons.

And when you know… I have friends, you know, who were associated with Praxis people, you know, some like Rudi Supek and that crowd from Zagreb. And, I mean, their critique… and even the non-Praxis critique, my mentor in Zagreb in 1983 was Josip Županov, sociologist, and when you read his critique of Yugoslavia, it was withering, I mean, and quite accurate, and, you know, hard-nosed. It wasn't sentimental or nationalist or anything like that, not even pro-democracy. He was just saying it doesn't work. And the Praxis people wanted then to create a better sort of Communist socialist kind of thing.

So, but philosophically, you meet these Western guys who taught in philosophy departments. For a summer, I spent time with this guy from the University of Illinois. And this was in '83, he was telling me, he says, "All those guys are really good philosophers like Mihailo Marković and these guys like that." He says, "But all they do is talk about nationalism," (laughs). He says, "But when you get them talking about, kind of, Marxist philosophy, they're really good." And so that the Yugoslavs were… Yugoslavia was seen as this really interesting… but it could afford… looking back, it could afford to exist between these two systems, and Tito brilliantly played the two off against each other and provided a certain amount of space. Economically it never quite got its act together fully, but…

So that's the way people looked at it. The self-management was an interesting thing. The effort to create a genuine community, a country, etcetera, etcetera was one way of looking at it. At the same time, there were people, especially the literature types… this guy Ante Kadić who taught at Indiana, who was a Croat nationalist, but he was a great guy, but he hated… I mean, you know, talked about saving the Croats, etcetera, etcetera, but, you know… and I read his stuff and I go, "God!" And then I met him at, you know, a couple of Slavic studies conferences, he's a delightful man, you know. And then I had a common… a friend of mine who was a professor at the University of Zagreb, political science, member of the Party, he later became… he was Ambassador under… from Croatia. But he went to Indiana in the '80s, and he knew Kadić… and, you know, and Grego was a Party member and Kadić was… he goes, "Aaahhh, Kadić is a great guy, you know."

So there was this sense that Yugoslavs, they, there was, you know, understood irony, and that there was this sense that there was this good life. And who was the guy? The editor of *Republika*[40] for a long time. When he would come to the United States, like, the Yugoslav community would say, "He's going to be smuggling in *kajmak*,"[41] (laughs). You know, kind of stuff. Because over there, what do you miss? I miss burek, I miss *kajmak*, you know. And so that's the sort of thing that you, at the same time… so Yugoslavia was seen as this sort of cool place.

I could… and one of the reasons I chose to study Yugoslavia rather than the Soviet Union is that you could… everything could be set the day before you were getting ready to fly to Moscow, they could say you don't have a visa. They could turn you down for whatever reason. I could show up… or I did, I

[39] The group of Yugoslav social scientists and philosophers from Zagreb and Belgrade dedicated to the study and practice of Marxist humanism.
[40] The Croatian magazine for art, literature, and society.
[41] A thick and creamy dairy product usually served as a condiment.

showed up in Belgrade, I think, in '78 or '79. I had no visa. 20 minutes later, I was in. It was simple. And it was a Communist country, you know. So it was a really interesting place in that way.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When you returned in '83, was that for your doctorate?

Mark Baskin: Yeah, '82-'83. And I ended up not doing the National Question because that would have been too dicey. I ended up… my doctoral thesis was about the return and integration of migrant workers, Yugoslav migrant laborers, *Gastarbeiter*.[42]

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yeah, yeah, there was a huge…

Mark Baskin: Five percent of the population were living abroad, 14 percent of the labor force.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Which started in the '60s, or?

Mark Baskin: It started after the economic reform in 1965. That was the deal that Tito made with the IMF. You know, that they had to give… had to open up the borders and to try to get rid of this inefficient use of laborers, of labor. And then there was…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was it worth it?

Mark Baskin: Yeah, they were essentially allowed to travel. And they weren't well-treated, you know, abroad, etcetera. It created lots of problems in the end.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yeah, they were like mainly in Germany and Switzerland, right?

Mark Baskin: They're in France. They're all over.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay.

Mark Baskin: There was a big community even when… there was a big Yugoslav community in Australia even. I'm not sure they'd go work temporarily. But there was this… there'd be chain migration. So people would go I was looking at it as a policy problem, you know, how are they managing this as a policy problem. But, you know, they'd go to Germany, and then one person would go, then they'd bring their families with them. And there was this idea of rotations with the Germans, that you'd come for six months, make some money, go home, but it didn't happen that way, because there was no real investment at home, and people would take the money that they saved, and there were no capital markets that they could invest into. So what they would do is they'd build big houses (laughs) and stuff like that.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Where were they from mainly? Which countries of federal Yugoslavia?

Mark Baskin: They were all over, but mainly the highest percentage of people was Croatian, slightly. And… but there were a lot of people from Serbia as well, a lot, a huge number. And people from Kosovo ultimately began going. There was a… Kosovo, like, Switzerland was the place. People had

[42] German term literally meaning "guest workers."

different countries. You know, everyone went to Germany because Germany was huge, but there were people who went to Scandinavia as well, people that went to France, so…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was your conclusion? Was there any? Like, through the thesis?

Mark Baskin: Well, my thesis was, again, it was a very Michigan kind of public policy thesis. My conclusion was that the policymaking process of a Communist country is not that different from the policymaking process of a non-Communist country, and that it's very non-rational in similar ways, even though there's this image that it's totally under control. So that was my conclusion. And I didn't… I wasn't really looking at the… and then I also… I said… and then I also made a conclusion about policymaking in Yugoslavia, which is that it's more important for its symbolic content than its practical content.

And I ended up quoting some of Clifford Geertz's work in my concluding chapter about… and he did this history of 19th century Bali where he talks about… he spends lots of time how they collect, how they produce, how they collect taxes, and then it all ends with a huge festival every year. They spend all their money on this huge festival, and he says it's a statement about… it's a statement to themselves about who they are. And I thought that there's so much about Yugoslav policymaking that's like that. And I still think so much of policymaking in this region is like that. But it is like that everywhere too, so… So that was my conclusion, not particularly… and then I came back in '89.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How so?

Mark Baskin: Because I wanted…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: It was quite a difficult time to be back really.

Mark Baskin: Oh, it was fun.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: (Laughs). Really?

Mark Baskin: Well, yeah, in '82-'83, you know, I coached a baseball team in Zagreb. I was in a play. There was… Yugoslavia was this place that was totally open, right? And then in '89, I applied because one of the things… one of the schemes was that they thought that maybe small business, *mala privreda*, as they said in Croatian, right?… and that the idea was that people could come back and they can invest, maybe create some capital markets, etcetera. So I came back to transform my thesis, which I defended in '86, into a book. And then I came back and then, you know, as we say in Croatian, "*Puknuo je film*"[43] you know. It just all went to hell.

And so I began just… I began doing other things while I was here, and I didn't… I did a whole bunch of stuff on that, but then I ended up following the democratization movement. I would go to meetings of UJDI (Association for a Yugoslav Democratic Initiative) in Zagreb, where Branko Horvat would come and apologize. You know, there was this amazing stuff that was going on until…

[43] Cro.: literally, the film was cut, an expression used to describe when things go wrong, unplanned, not according to a script.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you go more into detail? What was happening? Like, how did you find yourself in those clubs?

Mark Baskin: So I was at the Political Science Faculty, and I was with, at the time… we're now the older generation… but at the time, they were the middle generation of faculty members. And they were all kind of progressive. It was all these guys who spent a lot of time outside studying in Germany, in the U.S., and things. And that they were hooked up, but they were also all… Zak wasn't… did you ever meet Zakušak? He's a… anyway, it seems you don't know. Anyway, Zak, I don't think, was a Party member, but Grego and others were.

And… so they… this UJDI in Zagreb was an effort to kind of bring… and I know it was here too. I know Veton[44] and Shkëlzen[45] and others were doing it here. That… it was an effort to bring that generation that went to jail in the 1970's with the generation that was still around and to try to create some kind of reconciliation, to create some kind of broader national community around a set of principles that were based on kind of democratic governance, because the kind of… all of the multiple experiments of Yugoslavia just weren't working, and so that… it was clear that, especially, you know, in '88, the first non-Communist government came to power in Poland.

You know, this Mazowiecki government, and then there were these winds of change coming. And then you had the Slovenes. And the Croat… it was while I was there, actually. The election within the Party, who was going to be… Račan[46] won, and he ran against a guy named Ivo Družić. He wasn't a bad guy apparently. But Račan was the reformist. I mean, he was the guy that said, "Yes, we should have elections," and all that kind of stuff. And so there was this move… it was nigh, that communism had ceased to function. The Berlin Wall fell, you know, all that kind of stuff. And so that… whereas Yugoslavia should be first. And so…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: It might as well, especially in light of those new developments, right?

Mark Baskin: So there was all that. And then, and my colleagues at the Political Science Faculty, because they were all Račan's people, they were all really confident. And…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were you working as a professor?

Mark Baskin: No, I was doing research.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Ah, you were just a researcher.

Mark Baskin: I didn't have an office or anything, but, I mean, I would just… I'd go hang there, you know, and I had a… but, at the time, my mentor was a guy by the name of Ivan Šiber, who was a political psychologist. And Šiber was a great… he was a very good academic. And… and so it was just an exciting time. And…

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[44] Veton Surroi is a Kosovo Albanian publicist, politician and former journalist. Surroi is the founder and former leader of the ORA political party, and was a member of Kosovo assembly from 2004 to 2008.
[45] Shkëlzen Maliqi is a Kosovar Albanian philosopher, art critic, and political analyst.
[46] Ivica Račan, who later became Croatian prime minister.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did they have an idea that Yugoslavia would be falling?

Mark Baskin: No, they didn't. They didn't. But then I remember, you probably never heard of Jill Irvine. You're actually, I keep forgetting you're the younger generation. I remember going to pick up these two guys, two people I knew. One had been… where did Evan go? I don't know where Evan went, but Evan, he was an economist, and he had a four-month fellowship. I picked him up like in January-February. And while I was at the airport in Zagreb, you could all these guys, all these *HDZ*[47] guys coming back.

For the first time, these guys from immigration who'd been in… wherever they had been, Australia, Europe, and you could just sort of see how enthusiastic they were. I did an interview with Gojko Šušak right after the election. Šušak later became the Minister of Defense under Tuđman.[48] He was like the godfather of the *Hercegovci*.[49] And, you know, they were just so excited about this. And the guys in the Party, they sounded a lot like… you could see here, a little bit like PDK[50] I would have to say, in the sense that… well, there's truth that, you know, the PDK has really experienced smart guys, all of that kind of stuff. "Well, we have the best ticket." And they just got… you know, they just got wiped out. And so…

So there was this really exciting thing. And at the time, I was friends with… so one of my older friends was a woman named Dubravka Ugrešić, who you may know {points to Erëmirë Krasniqi}. And Dubravka is an old friend of mine. And Dubravka introduced me to a friend of hers, Vesna Kesić. You may even know her because Vesna later became one of the leading feminists in Zagreb. Vesna was the assistant editor of *Start*, which was the Yugoslav *Playboy*. And I was getting ready to go to Bulgaria just to visit my friends for New Year's, and Vesna says, "Listen, tell me, why don't you write an article for us about what's going on in Bulgaria?" So I did. So I began writing for *Start*. I wrote several articles for *Start* about these odd things going on in Bulgaria.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: They were also Communist, right? Bulgaria?

Mark Baskin: Yeah, yeah.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was happening there?

Mark Baskin: Oh, just things fell apart. And I'd known some Bulgarian from my earlier time there. Again, these people that were the children of the *nomenklatura* who were very critical of the system.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Really?

Mark Baskin: Yeah, yeah, oh yeah, they were incredible. It was… when you spend time in… they used to say in these Yugoslav journals, they'd talk about "countries of real socialism," *realni socijalizam*. It was… and I lived for… something to talk about… I lived for about a year and half in Brighton Beach, which is this area in Brooklyn, where all of these Soviet Jewish emigres came. And there was a kind of

[47] Croatian: *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* (Croatian Democratic Union).
[48] Franjo Tuđman, the first post-independence President of Croatia.
[49] Hercegovci are Croats from Bosnia.
[50] Alb., *Partia Demokratike e Kosovës* (Democratic Party of Kosovo).

closeness that there was not here, because Yugoslavia was already infected by capitalism and people going in different directions. I think maybe in Kosovo there was because of the incredible repression, especially after 1990… but even before. That there was a closeness of a certain kind of quality and movement that there was not in Zagreb. Yeah, maybe more in Belgrade than in Zagreb actually. And in Bulgaria it was like that very much. And, well, that's a whole other story. And so I spent time there.

But, you know, I could get in my car in Zagreb, end up in Sofia nine hours later, go through one border (laughs). It was really pretty simple. You know Belgrade down to Kragujevac and across. And…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And now there are three (laughs).

Mark Baskin: And so, yeah, it's awful now. And then…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was it to be present in these times within this geography?

Mark Baskin: Well, you could see in '82-'83, it was still a period of great repression. So there were all these *tribina*. All guys, Žarko Puhovski, and all these other guys would be at these *tribina*. I used to go to this thing, this, this is what happened after Praxis was… this is where people would come from all over Yugoslavia once a month at the Philosophy Faculty and have these intense discussions. And many of whom later became kind of leadership… the younger generation. The older generation were people like… Vesna Pusić's father, who was one of the people who convened that. He taught at the Law Faculty in Zagreb.

So, for me, I can send you… did I ever send this to you, Chester? It's a diary that I wrote in the magazine *Danas*. Every week, they would have the diary of some famous or prominent person. And when I came back just after the [Croatian] War, they asked me to write my diary, and I did. And I published it, about what it was like in March of 1992. And I remember in one of the paragraphs, I said in here, "In Yugoslavia, life was always more *aktuell* than it was in the United States." In the United States, we have… how did Susan used to put it?… it's this market-based anonymi or something, you know, where everyone's just concerned with their own personal lives. And whereas, there was a real effort in Yugoslavia through the end of the '80s to build a community that was meaningful and inclusive, and it failed (laughs). It failed, but there was this effort. But, you know, there was this effort.

And there were people… and Dubravka was one… there were people that… there were these pan-Yugoslav groups. People would come up from Skopje. I never saw anyone from Kosovo there, although there could have been. People came up from Skopje. Dobrica Ćosić would come. Guys came down from Slovenia. You know, there were guys from Bosnia that were there. You know, it was a real effort to create something.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How long did you stay? '89 up to when?

Mark Baskin: A year.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: A year. And then you went back to the U.S.?

Mark Baskin: Then I was teaching. At the same time, I was teaching at this small liberal arts, second-third-tier liberal arts school in suburban New York, Manhattanville College, where my students were more concerned about their social lives than about their studies, to put it… a bit like AUK[51] in some ways I would say (laughs). And then I met someone, you know, who had a link to the UN, and he said… and right around the time that the first UN mission was going on… it must have been late '91, early '92… and he said… you know, I speak Croatian and all this… and he said, "Well, you should go work for us, man." And so, about a year later… I took… I then rode off and got a job working for the UN. And so then I worked in Croatia and Bosnia, and then I came down to Kosovo. And…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So you went before the war to Croatia to observe what was going on? Or what was the role of this UN mission?

Mark Baskin: It was a mission called the UNPROFOR, the UN Protection Force. And my friend (laughs), this academic from Zagreb, he says, "Who are you protecting?" (laughs). And I said, "Force protection. You know, we have to make sure that we're protected." I explained that all to him. He said, "That's fantastic." So he used to always tell his students that UNPROFOR is protecting itself (laughs). This is true.

Because, you know, you have to read the mandates very carefully. We had a mandate to do certain things. And so I was a civil affairs officer, and I went… I had wanted to go to Bosnia because all Americans love Bosnia.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How? How so?

Mark Baskin: Well… what John Fine told me, the medieval historian who's very old now… great historian… he said when I first met him, before my first trip to Yugoslavia ever, he said, "You know, you might want to go to Sarajevo because, in many ways, it's the most cosmopolitan place in Yugoslavia." Because it's the place where… still, even with now, you know, the Gulf States and everything. And all this has become {brings hands together}. Do you ever go to Sarajevo {points at Erëmirë}?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: No, it's too complicated.

Mark Baskin: Yeah, yeah, right, I understand, right, right.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: First, you have to go to Macedonia and get a visa. And then you have to travel for so long.

Mark Baskin: I know, I know. You fly through Vienna. It's complicated.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's complicated.

Mark Baskin: So it's less than now than it was before, but it really was… it's a bit like Prizren, a bit reminds me, reminds me of Bosnia in one sense that…

[51] The American University in Kosovo.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: American type of character, or?

Mark Baskin: No, no, not because of America. I'm saying Americans who go, we just love Bosnia because… and the Bosnian narrative was such a great narrative, which is that we have this community, especially in Sarajevo. We had a community of Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. We all got along. And it really was true that there was this… you were a *Sarajlija*.[52] You weren't whatever else. You know, people like Karadžić[53] and Krajišnik[54] and these guys, I mean, they were *sejlaci*.[55] I mean, they were… truly they were. And then you look at the guys who… and one of the great tragedies of Yugoslavia was that, at the end of the regime, the liberals within the Party were all really good. I mean, they were all open, willing to, wanting to have multiparty and democracy and all of this kind of stuff. But yet they were no… they no longer had the power to do it, and that was the great irony or tragedy if you want. And so…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was it the multiculturalism that reigned in Bosnia that attracted Americans?

Mark Baskin: Yeah, well, all of us… this, you know,… I just… I loved going to… I'd always loved Bosnia, you know. It was just… it was really Turkish in that sense, you know, *Baščaršija*. And I'd go… you know, I'd go… these close friends of mine… a guy who'd take me to the village where they built their *vikendica* outside of Sarajevo. And the family who helped build it, they were these traditional *muslimani* who were wearing *dimije*.[56] You know, when you go to their house, they immediately clean the living room, they put that little down table, and then all the food they have they bring out. They're forcing you to drink *rakia*.[57] You know, it's just amazing hospitality. It's just really kind of… it's very charming. You know, and…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So you went for a mission as well?

Mark Baskin: Well, I wanted to go to Bosnia, but instead, in its wisdom, the Mission put me in Petrinja, which is south of Zagreb. And I was there for a year. Then I went to headquarters in Zagreb working for the Mission doing political analysis and various things and a bunch of other…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: This is pre-war?

Mark Baskin: No, this is '93, from '93. Before the war, I was there in '92 and I wrote… I was there in '92 for a total of a couple of months or six weeks or something. And then I applied to become a UN civil affairs officer. And I… you know, when I got the job, it was in April of '93, and I went, ultimately went to Petrinja, and I was there for about eight or nine months. I set up a civil affairs office. And a lot of things

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[52] Bosnian term for a person from Sarajevo.
[53] Radovan Karadžić, the President of Republika Srpska during the Bosnian War.
[54] Momčilo Krajišnik, the Bosnian Serb political leader, who co-founded the nationalist Serb Democratic Party.
[55] Pejorative term for peasants.
[56] Billowing white satin pantaloons that narrow at the ankles, Turkish style. They are made with about twelve meters of fabric.
[57] *Raki* is a very common alcoholic drink made from distillation of fermented fruit, a well known drink in the Balkans.

that we did there… you know, the war was not over. I mean there was this Vance plan,[58] but it was hard to get them to implement it. We didn't have a… we had a Chapter VI authority, meaning we were there working with the cooperation of the parties, so we couldn't force them. In Kosovo, we had a Chapter VII mandate until 2008. The UN did, that is we were the government. We could tell you what to do. We couldn't tell anybody what to do. And so we were trying to… so I…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was it? How was being back in Zagreb in those conditions?

Mark Baskin: Well, actually, I lived in the region, but I would go to Zagreb. It was difficult because in '92… especially in '92 and in '93, there was still tape on windows. I mean, the results of the fighting were still there. All of my friends had really gone through a lot of different changes. The war there really did that. And…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was there social life?

Mark Baskin: Yeah, yeah, by '93, everything was getting back to normal. They were rebuilding and all of this kind of stuff. Tuđman was reestablishing his authority, and they were all making lots of money in the government, and that kind of stuff. And… but there was a unity there, even if you were like a social democrat, and you didn't really like *HDZ* very much.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was *HDZ* in power since then?

Mark Baskin: *HDZ* was in power from 1990 right up until 2000.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay.

Mark Baskin: Yeah, well.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: That's a long time in power.

Mark Baskin: Well, they got to write the rules and everything. Once they were in power, they wrote election rules that were favorable to them. And… but it was mixed, you know. There was… because… like in Osijek, there was the Liberals, covered the city of Osijek, so there were those kinds of conflicts going on. But socially, it was okay. And it was very interesting I have to say.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How different was it from before? I mean, it was totally different, but how did you experience that?

Mark Baskin: For me, it was more a period of continuity. Right. I was there '75-6 for a year. '82, '83, '89, '90, now it's '93. Basically, from '93 until '97, I was in Croatia, and a lot of the time in Zagreb. And there was continuity. There are friends I had that I still saw. There were lots of changes going on. People that were outsiders earlier were now insiders, academics, politically. In my official position in different places working with the UN, I had kind of formal… not authority, but I had a formal place. So I dealt for

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[58] A peace plan negotiated by former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who was serving as a UN Special Envoy, in November 1991.

a couple of years, I was dealing with the issue of missing persons, for example. So I would have all these relationships with that.

When I was in Vukovar in 1996-'97, I organized the exhumation of the first big war crimes… Ovčara… 200 bodies were dug up. And so I was dealing with those issues. And dealing with an issue like that. I'm dealing with, you know, the kind of people that were very close to Tuđman, you know, his people in his office and deputy prime ministers and all that kind of stuff. So I was doing… I had a place I hadn't had earlier. Earlier, I was a nobody academic. You know, "Who's this guy?" You know, I waited nine months to get permission to do some interviews in 1982. Now, I was, you know, working for the UN. I could go to villages without any problem because that's what I did. And so in that sense it was kind of good. But so, you know, I was older and I was in a different kind of position, so in many respects it was like that.

But, unlike anyone else, or unlike 99 percent of the other people working for the UN, I had a history in Croatia, I had a history in the Balkans And so I had a lot of sympathy for the people in Croatia, but a lot of my colleagues did not (chuckles). And, you know, because the Croat… down in Kosovo, it's similar today a little bit you just want the UN to leave. I was at dinner the other night at a place with someone who's a political advisor to one of the leaders, and the UN was having some kind of event there, and I know I saw no UN guys around, and I said hello to them at the beginning, you know. And he goes, "Hopefully, we're celebrating their departure," he said, you know. And in many respects, this guy was with his very… he wasn't hostile or anything. I mean, he knows some of them even. But that's the point.

And the… from the Croatian point of view, in 1992, the UN came in to take the UNPAs, the UN Protected Areas, and to reintegrate them into Croatia. This should have taken a year or so. And then the Serbs could have stayed or left or done whatever they wanted to do, and then it would be all of Croatia. Instead, the Serbs immediately began setting up this project of building a state, you know, *Republika Srpska Krajina*. And they found all kinds of ways to, you know, claim that they were continuing to be there, and they were making it very difficult and that.

And so the Croats basically began saying to the UN, "What the fuck are you guys doing? I mean, come on." And I have friends who are like that. I also had friends all over. I mean, I was friends with Milorad Pupovac, who I came to know, who's now the leading Serb politician in Croatia. He had a much different kind of… he was trying to bring everyone together. And so there's all that going on.

And so, in a sense, until Dayton,[59] being in Zagreb, or being in… I'm just thinking of this now… it was like being in Yugoslavia before. There was… it was like a movement about trying to build something. It was not normal. It wasn't something that was polluted by kind of personalistic capitalism, you know, because there was a broader public purpose that was significant. So that's what it was. And so that's what it was.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What happened to your personal life? Like, did you marry in the meantime?

Mark Baskin: I did.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And then we'll come back to Kosovo.

[59] The Dayton Agreement that ended the Bosnian War in late 1995.

Mark Baskin: I… there was a woman I'd been seeing before I went to work for the UN, who I married in 1995. In fact, I went back and… I went back, and we got married, and we had our first child like around the same time that we got… after we formally married. And that was right… a couple of days before Operation Flash when the Croats took back Sector West.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: *Oluja*?[60]

Mark Baskin: No, before *Oluja*. *Oluja* was in August. This was in May.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And how was this called originally? Flash.

Mark Baskin: *Bljesak* in Croatian.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay.

Mark Baskin: *Bljesak*, I think. And I was in… Suzanne had just… Rebecca was just born, Rebecca who spent a summer here a couple of years ago (laughs) at our summer program [at AUK]. And I remember getting on the phone with Mark Thompson saying, "What's going on?" He said… he was going… it was interesting. And so… and then they came back, and on the eve of Operation Storm, I was warned by… I was running… I was directing the, at the time, the Analysis and Assessment Unit of the Mission and one of the women who worked with us was Tone Bringa, who was an anthropologist from Norway who had written a great book about Bosnia. And she was engaged… I don't know if she was engaged yet… to the American Ambassador, Peter Galbraith, at the time. And Tone said to me about two weeks before Operation Storm, she goes, "Maybe Suzanne should go home," (laughs).

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Your wife?

Mark Baskin: Yeah, and Rebecca. Because, you know, who knew what was going to happen?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Because they came with you.

Mark Baskin: Yeah, they came. Yeah, and so that limited my choices a little bit as a UN person, because we were in Zagreb and then I had an opportunity to go to Belgrade, but I didn't want to go to Belgrade. So instead I went to work for the Mission in eastern Slavonia, and we moved to Osijek for a year. And I would have liked to have gone to Bosnia at that time, but things were really difficult just from an everyday life point of view. So I waited about a year or so, and then an opportunity came and I went down there.

I had to… I went down to visit, you know, to meet people… they were friends of mine who I'd known earlier from the Mission. And I went to the store to make sure that there were Pampers[61] (laughs) in the store. That was a key threshold that we needed to have: Are Pampers available? Because when they weren't available in Zagreb, we would just drive up to Metro[62] in Graz [Austria] and pick them up. It was

[60] *Operacija Oluja* (Operation Storm), the last major battle during the Croatian War of Independence.
[61] An American diaper brand.
[62] A German wholesale store.

simple. But from Sarajevo, it was not a two-hour drive. It was much longer. So then we moved to Sarajevo for a couple of years.

[The story continues in part four]

Part Four

[This part of the interview was conducted on February 29, 2020]

Mark Baskin: Yeah, so, yeah, it was different in different places. I mean, when I lived in Petrinja, for example… this was in the so-called *Republika Srpska Krajina*… and the people there were… they were sort of 95 percent Serbs. There were these Croats left in villages in the region and I would go visit them. And they lived kind of not… they lived pretty miserably. But the Serbs there lived pretty miserably too. There wasn't any kind of public life. And, whenever I'd go to Zagreb, I would occasionally ask neighbors, "What do you want? Do you need anything?," which shocked them. You know, I would smuggle through, and they always asked for Vegeta[63] (laughs)… was the thing that they always missed, so I'd be smuggling big things of Vegeta and various kinds of pizza ketchup and stuff like that, because people were living on those sorts of things. And then so it was difficult during the war. But then I went to Zagreb. And so, in Zagreb, I was just living in Zagreb. And there was… everyone was kind of normal for the most part.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you maybe tell us more about how people started separating, how the separation between ethnicities became clearer, sharper? Can you…

Mark Baskin: Oh, it was just… I mean, the war defined ethnicity as the only kind of thing. And everybody knew who the Croats were in the sector. Because, you know, these small villages where everybody knew everybody. Everybody knew who they were. 30 years, 20 years earlier, they'd all gotten along more or less, and everyone knew who they were. And, if you were a Croat in the sector… what we called the sector in the *Republika Srpska Krajina*, then it was very difficult for you. And one of the things that I did as a UN official was we'd get requests from the Croatian Red Cross that so-and-so is ill and needs medical treatment that can only be provided in Croatia.

So I would… I did a number of these, and then one of my people that worked with me did them, because I would do these medical evacuations, and there was a lot of kind of bureaucratic stuff and approvals that needed to be signed and all this. And then you would go to their house and you would take them out. And, you know, you would have to do a visit first, and, you know, you'd be… I remember going to a house that the windows probably hadn't been opened in 20 years. It has this you-know {holds up hands close to face}. And so they opened the windows for us, so there'd be fresh air. And they apologized for the *propuh*[64] as we say in Zagreb. What do they say here?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: *Promaja*.

[63] A seasoning made of dried vegetables and spices popular in the Balkans.
[64] Croation: *propuh*, means draft. A term for a cold air current drawn in from an open window or door.

Mark Baskin: Yeah, *promaja*. But in Croatian, it's *propuh* (chuckles). They apologized for the *propuh*. And my interpreter said, "Oh, no, no, no, we love *propuh*" (laughs). I remember this really clearly. And so, you know, they lived pretty badly and they… ordinary people lived badly. It was this domination. There's a movie *Cold Mountain*, which I think there's an Academy Award or two for acting that went to it.

Chester Eng: Yes, that was in 2003.

Mark Baskin: That's a movie about the [American] South and the [American] Civil War during the Civil War that just shows the way in which these kind of local bands controlled these cities, terrorized them, and it was sort of a bit like that. So that, you know, where things really… the place where I was in, Goražde, in 1994. And it's a kind of well-known case. There's this great graphic novel, or graphic book, written about Goražde by Sacco. I can't remember his first name. And this was right after there'd been this siege for about a month or so, and then in which the Serbs were trying to… because Goražde is right on the Drina River… and the Serbs wanted… their strategic interests were to make it a Serb place, and the Bosniaks were holding out, effectively pretty much.

And, in the end, there was a deal that was cut, and then I went in with a group of… I don't know… this was Sérgio, you know, de Mello[65] and General Soubirou, who was the French general who was in charge of Sector Sarajevo, and a whole bunch of civil affairs officers and other military guys and police and stuff. And we went in and I ended up staying there for a month leading negotiations. And it's a very complicated agreement that, I don't know, would take me ten minutes to describe, so I won't do it.

But you were asking about the people, and the people had lived for… you know, you they'd been for like two months or something in basements and things. And you know that when we came in, all of sudden they were free, and people are walking out. And it's like seeing these photographs after World War II. They were… I remember really distinctly, in the midst of this rubble, because there had been some bombing and stuff, there was a woman who dressed beautifully (chuckles), you know, with lipstick and everything. And you wonder where she got it or where she preserved it from and just walking through these things. And then in storefronts, in stores, families were living, they had goats and things. I mean, it was really amazing at the very beginning, the situation there.

And so, you know, and then the thing about the war is that, later after the war, it's like you meet people from these places. So I met Serb refugees from Goražde, you know, people who grew up in Serbia, in Užice, someone who was from Goražde, so you know that… it's like it affected everybody horribly. Ordinary people suffered tremendously, and so they were dependent on their leaders and things. So…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How long did you stay?

Mark Baskin: In Goražde, I was there for about two or three months.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: No, entirely, your mission in that region.

Mark Baskin: In the…

[65] The Brazilian UN diplomat who was the political affairs director for the UNPROFOR at the time.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you…

Mark Baskin: I worked for the UN from April…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yeah, yeah, were you going back and forth, or?

Mark Baskin: No, no, for me, headquarters was always somewhere: Zagreb, Vukovar, Sarajevo, and Pristina. Those were the kind of the mission headquarters. Those were the four missions I worked for, but I spent time in… I was the FYROM, as we called it, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the official name at the time. I was the FYROM desk officer, so I would go down to… I remember in '94 when there was this threat of a conflict, so I went down. We had an office, we had a mission down there, and I remember meeting with Arbën Xhaferi.[66] There was another Xhaferi who led one of the other parties, and then I met with guys from the Macedonians parties, and we were trying to figure out… this was when they were trying to establish the University of Tetovo, which was seen as dangerously radical stuff and all that. And so… and I recall cab drivers telling me, "There's going to be war (chuckles). There's going to be war." And so… and of course, there was a war in Macedonia.

So I spent my time going in lots of different places. And so I was basically based in Zagreb from '93 to '96. Then I was in Vukovar from '96 to '97. Then I was in Sarajevo from '97 to '99. And I was in Prizren from '99 to 2000, through the end of 2000.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Oh wow. When did you come to Prizren?

Mark Baskin: In June of '99.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: That's the very beginning.

Mark Baskin: Yeah, well, I mentioned that Sérgio Vieira de Mello, and he is the UN official who was killed in Iraq in 2003. And Sergio had been the head of civil affairs in the old days, and I worked very closely with him in Goražde. I was, he was there for a week, and I was his notetaker and stuff. And then I was on the phone with him every day as we were trying to move these negotiations forward. And so… and he knew that I had… I think I sent you the article last… this article I published, "Crisis in Kosovo." And I… he knew I knew Kosovo. And so when he came to [Kosovo], he was named the ad interim Special Representative of the Secretary General. He wanted to put together a team, and it was a great team and he wanted me on the team. And so my boss in Sarajevo didn't want me to come.

And so… this is true: She told me… Kofi Annan's Chef de Cabinet called her at dinner and said, "You got to let Baskin go." So the next day… I went the next day, and I saw Sérgio and some others. And then he sent me to Prizren, and some of the people on that mission, the guy who organized my trip to

[66] Arbën Xhaferi (1942-2012) was a Republic of North Macedonia politician of Albanian origin. He was born in Tetova, Yugoslavia, and died in 2012 at the Skopje Hospital after a cerebral hemorrhage. Xhaferi was president of the Democratic Party of Albanians, an ethnic Albanian political party in the Republic of North Macedonia, and was an advocate of rights for ethnic Albanians in the country.

Prizren and then later worked for Kouchner[67] as a political advisor my whole time there was a German diplomat named Axel Dittmann who… Axel was most recently the Ambassador to Serbia. He left about a year ago, and now he's back in Berlin. And I ran into Axel later. So some of the people that came through the Mission were really very gifted, talented people. Axel was an excellent political officer.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was Prizren then? Can you tell us about those first days when you were settling in?

Mark Baskin: Yeah, well, there'd been reports that Prizren had been destroyed, or there had been a lot of bombing there. There had been in places like Zhur and Krusha e Madhe[68] and Krusha e Vogël.[69] But in Prizren itself, there really wasn't that much. The Germans [peacekeeping forces] were already there. There were all these journalists I'd known from the old days, American journalists. Roy Gutman, who was the guy who discovered the camps in Bosnia in 1992. Roy was there. This other guy who… they made a movie about his reporting in Afghanistan, Jonathan Landay. He was there, and I know Jon. He's a good friend of mine.

And it was really anarchic at the time. And people were coming in, and the UN or the… I guess it was the UN who'd announced this, but I don't know… we had tried to create a situation where the refugees wouldn't return for a month or two while we sorted things out, you know, while we established ourselves. They, of course, came back immediately. So while I was going in, we'd see these columns of, I assume, Serbs leaving. There were Albanians coming in from Kukës and from Skopje. And… and the first days were really really rough.

I was brought in by some guys from OSCE,[70] and we stayed… so they kind of hooked us up and, you know, set up some meetings for us. And, you know, so I ended up staying there for about a month with this one family whose son… you probably know {gesturing at Erëmirë} his son. Shporta. Ares Shporta. I stayed in Ares Shporta's house for my first month that I was there. And his mother, who I ran into the other day, she now works in Sudan or Somalia for the UN. And so it's kind of sort of amazing, you know.

And then, you know, and pretty quickly, because some of these OSCE people knew, and people knew that we were there, so I met sort of key figures in town. The Orthodox Church men were still there, and I remember having meetings with them. And the Germans who were setting up. And there was also Dutch KFOR.[71] Those are the two contingents I remember. The Austrians were there as well. I think Swiss. You always can feel confident when you have the Swiss Army defending you [chuckles]. You know, they did a lot of great civil affairs work, I think actually. And so…

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[67] Bernard Kouchner (1939-) is a physician and politician, the founder of Médecins sans Frontières. While he was France's Health Minister, Kouchner had made a statement recognizing that Albanian students in Kosovo had been poisoned. After the war, in 1999, he was appointed the UN Special Representative in Kosovo.

[68] Krusha e Madhe is a village in the area of Rahovec, where more than ninety men were killed in the massacre on March 27, 1999. The massacre of Krusha e Madhe is documented in many news reports but also in the Human Rights Watch report, *Under Orders* (2001).

[69] Krusha e Vogël is a village in the area of Rahovec, where in March 1999 Serbian troops disappeared and killed the entire male population. The massacre of Krusha e Vogël of March 26, 1999 is documented in many news reports but also in the Human Rights Watch report, *Under Orders* (2001).

[70] The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

[71] Kosovo Force, the NATO-led international peacekeeping force in the country.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You mention the OSCE because they were better acquainted with the place?

Mark Baskin: They were already there.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Because they were there, yeah.

Mark Baskin: And the guy who brought me in, I wish he had been the head of the office. I mean, he was a great guy. It was this British policeman who brought me in. But, uou know, it was fine. But, you know, when he came in, you know, we're walking down the street with this guy… because I'd worked with policemen. The mission I was in in Bosnia was a policing mission. What we did is that we helped advise and we helped develop training systems and all this for police. And so I worked closely with British police, so I got along with these guys well.

And as we're walking down, he points to this young woman, and he says, "You should hire her. She's great." So I hired her and she became my assistant. And now she's rather senior within the EUSR.[72] So I have to say, a lot of these people I hired back in 1999, everyone… some people have stayed within the international community. Others have… there's a guy I just ran into… I walked into Soma[73] about a month ago, and he says, "Mark, you don't remember, do you?" He says, "I used to do your IT." And I go, "Oh, it's great to see you." And then he goes… I said, "So what are you doing now?" He says, "Well, I own Gjirafa,"[74] (laughs). And then he told me his story, it's an amazing story, how he worked for the UN for a number of years, he had an option to either stay with the UN and go off to Africa, I think it was. Or he could have done a degree in the U.S., and he chose the latter path. And this led him… oh, this is amazing what happens so that… and there are all these kind of young bright people, and I was really kind of amazed at, really impressed by just how cool they were.

And, you know, at the same time the… so I went there for… so what I did is I went there for a few days, about four or five days, and I went and I reported to the headquarters the situation, and then they said, "Well, where do you want to go?" And I wanted to be the regional administrator, but those were political positions that governments owned, and I couldn't. So they said, "You could be deputy wherever you want," and I had a choice between going to Mitrovica and Prizren. And I chose Prizren because it was just really nice (laughs). And…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you describe what deputy meant?

Mark Baskin: That meant… so I was the second-most sort of… I was the second-highest ranking UN official in the region. And in the Prizren region, we covered Prizren, Suva Reka, Dragaš, Orahovac. And then some people from Malishevë came. Malishevë was not yet a municipality, and they had told me that they had been in… in the '80s, they were about to create a municipality when the Serbs kind of came in and took over and changed everything. And would we support them in that? And so I then went to the kind of influential… the people we took to be influential in Rahovec, Prizren, and Suva Reka because it would have taken land from all those, and I said, "What do you think? Should we?

[72] The European Union Special Representative.
[73] Soma Book Station, a popular café, bar, and restaurant in central Pristina.
[74] An Albanian-language web services company with offices in Kosovo.

Would you mind?" And they said, "Of course not," so we then created Malishevë, and so… or it was then created.

And so my responsibilities there. And then I was there alone for the first month or so before Leonard came, before the regional administrator came. He was a Swede. And in this time early on, I was the only expat from the UN, especially early on. There was a UNHCR[75] guy who was there briefly, and then he left and someone else came in. And OSCE was there, but they only had a few people at the time because they had all evacuated during the bombing.

And at the time, every day in Prizren, anywhere from four to ten houses were being burned… and on Kalaja, you know, that area behind the river, you know… areas where Serbs had lived before. And the head of the military comes to me and says, "Well, this is your job. I mean, this is civilian, burning houses. It's not a military thing." And I said, "Well, I'm the only one one that's here." And they said, "Well, when are you going to get your police here?" (chuckles). And it took a while to… because these kinds of missions, you don't… we don't have… it's not like the U.S. Army, you know, you can just send in, go to Fort Bragg[76] or whatever and you can have one thousand, two thousand people. You just can't do that. We don't…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So you didn't have any police with you?

Mark Baskin: We didn't. I had a couple of policemen from Bosnia, but the mission… but the mandate… and this gets into really complicated issues of public administration in a way: The mandate was completely different. Our mandate in Kosovo, in UNMIK, was we were the government. The mandate in Bosnia was that we were not the government. We were advising, so the policemen were not trained to do that. They had no… so, then in the end, I only had a couple of policemen. I remember I had an Indian, some kind of senior Indian police commander, who, you know… there was not much he could do. So we tried to do things. Right, we tried to do stuff while the houses were still burning, and…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When did it become stable-stable? Did you also have curfews, right?

Mark Baskin: We did have curfews in Prizren, yeah. I think we had the curfew pretty much the whole time I was there. I'm not… I mean, that's a detail that I can probably look up and see, but we had it for a long time. And once we began by August-September, we were able to do things a little better. And because the Germans, you know, in their defense, it was my feeling, you have 6,000 troops here, maybe you can do something. "Oh, we have other things to do." And they did, in fact, have other things to do. There's a lot of stuff that they had to do.

And they also were going out and doing the civil affairs stuff in the field, providing meals to people, doing that kind of thing, and then they were setting up and building up their camp, all of the things that you need to get done if you're going to have an effective operation. So it's not that they were just sitting around and making fun of us. I mean, they were… you know, they were doing their things. And so it was just a difficult time.

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[75] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
[76] A large U.S. Army base in North Carolina in the southeastern United States.

And early on, we worked very closely together with the military, OSCE, UNHCR. We'd have daily meetings. You know, what's going on? And there were… it was a very difficult situation. And so, about three weeks in, the German general says… this is right around the time Leonard came, just before Leonard came… the German general says to me, "I've got 75 people in jail," because our… his military police were working as police, but they're not really policemen. And he says,… and these aren't… "This is serious stuff." I mean, "They were arrested for serious things. What are going to do with them?," because that really was a civilian thing. So I asked my friends in the headquarters, lawyers, what do you… "What should we do?" They were creating an emergency judiciary in Pristina, and they said, "Why don't you create an emergency judiciary?"

And so he, this one UN lawyer, told me what I needed to do in terms of stuff and, with my assistants, we called all the lawyers and all the judges and prosecutors from Prizren. We met with them. And then we worked with OSCE. They filled out an application. OSCE, I think, vetted it. I also had to, you know, {waves his hand as if he were signing documents} a number of us. This is like the scholarships that you went on, you know. We did this vetting process. And then we had interviews and then we created this emergency judiciary. And, you know, there were some issues and problems with it, which I won't go into, but it was a… I also conducted what I believe is the first wedding in postwar Kosovo.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Really?

Mark Baskin: Yes, I did. This is…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: For whom?

Mark Baskin: So this is what happened.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were you endowed with such power?

Mark Baskin: Well, we had a… Edita Tahiri, who was then part of the LDK[77] presidency and very influential,[78] she brought… she wanted to introduce us to Eqrem Kryeziu, who was head of LDK.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Eqrem Kryeziu?

Mark Baskin: Yes, Eqrem Kryeziu, who was head of LDK in Prizren. So we met, and Eqrem was very nice. We had a nice meeting. Edita was very tough at this meeting, saying, you know, "You guys are the government. You have to establish order. You have to make sure that our people are protected," blah, blah, blah, all of this kind of stuff. And it was a very… she was very tough.

And then, you know, at the end of the meeting, she then takes me aside and she goes… and I didn't know her, although I did know of her… and she said, "Mark," she says, "my niece is engaged to get married, and there is no," (laughs) … "and there is no…" "There are no established norms for any of this. And so… and you guys are the government, so would you conduct the wedding?" So, again, I

[77] Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës - Democratic League of Kosovo. First political party of Kosovo, founded in 1989, when the autonomy of Kosovo was revoked, by a group of journalists and intellectuals. The LDK quickly became a party-state, gathering all Albanians, and remained the only party until 1999.
[78] Tahiri was the LDK's foreign affairs specialist in the 1990s.

checked with Pristina just to make sure that everything was fine, and it turned out that this was… it was interesting.

So we had to create all these documents. We had to create a, you know, marriage certificate. So they said you have to do this, this, and this because, you know, Serbs took a lot of the documentation away, and they weren't going to… we weren't going to follow on from what they had been doing anyways. So we created this document, and then we began… so we were the first in Prizren. We were kind of pioneers in creating all these new documents, including birth certificates and all this kind of stuff.

And so then it came down to the ceremony. And so one of my friends who sadly just passed away, Bashkim, Bashkim Nevzati, just died a few months ago, and he was a lawyer. And Bashkim… I turned to Bashkim and said, "Listen, can you help me? Come up." So he went, and we looked at the Yugoslav marriage law, code, and then we drafted something that was based on that but for the new circumstance. And then we did it. And I was really enthusiastic. I thought I'd be able to learn Albanian at the time. So we wrote it all out in Albanian, and so we conducted this wedding service. And, you know, Edita was there, and me, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

And this was in our headquarters, which was in the old Bankkos right on the river. And we didn't control the whole building. In fact, I think, Agron Shporta,[79] he had an office in that building from the old days. And so there's this piped-in music and, all of a sudden, as I'm conducting the wedding and I'm reading this speech I had in Albanian, I hear the song in the piped-in music "Listen to Your Heart" from Roxette (laughs). It totally freaked me out. So now, whenever I think of… the lead singer of Roxette just died, it made me think of the wedding in Prizren (chuckles).

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Why was it important to be legal? I mean, we're just asking this since it's a very cultural question for us. It's not like we always marry legally (laughs). We also do it…

Mark Baskin: Yeah, common law.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yeah.

Mark Baskin: Well, I don't know. I mean, you should ask…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When was this?

Mark Baskin: What?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When was this?

Mark Baskin: It was…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Right after?

Mark Baskin: It must have been early July.

[79] A poet, journalist, translator, and interpreter from Prizren.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Oh god.

Mark Baskin: Early to mid-July '99.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay.

Mark Baskin: Something like that. It wasn't much later. And, you know, I think… you know, I think that there was this sense… it came from LDK, but it also came from the sense that, you know, we have this new government, that they were working closely with the UN, and that we need to establish something that is ours, that isn't… does not come from the earlier system that was discriminatory and all that kind of stuff. And so…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you conduct more weddings after that time?

Mark Baskin: No, no, that's the only one I did. Although I did later, in September of 2000, as, in the run-up to the first election, where there were these municipal elections in October 2000, Bernard Kouchner, his intention was to visit every municipality. I was at that time the municipal administrator in Prizren, so I was working with his guys. And so we arranged to have a whole visit where he met with the municipal council, the administrative board. He had a town hall meeting. He walked. We had him visit the League of Prizren.

And Bernard knew very well the guy who had been my interpreter at the very beginning of the mission, because there were these issues having to do with sort of legal issues, and Hasan would go… and he was the interpreter, so he would go to Pristina with these judges from Prizren, and so he knew Bernard pretty well. And Hasan was getting married. And so we arranged, now with this whole thing, that… I said, "So, Bernard, you could marry Hasan, because, you know, you're the head of state theoretically." And he did (laughs).

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Really?

Mark Baskin: Yeah, so we, the day went. He had these meetings with us, we brought him to the League of Prizren,[80] we walked along the river, we went to Te Syla[81] for this big lunch. And Syla really outdid himself with all these *tavë*,[82] etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. And then we walked to our headquarters. He had a town hall meeting during this and walked to our headquarters. And then he married Hasan and Nazmie, and it was fantastic. It was really funny. It was great though. And Kouchner turns to me right before the ceremony, and he goes, "Can I really do this?" (laughs). I said, "Of course."

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You're also describing this moment in time which necessitated… it asked from you to start stuff from scratch. Can you describe it?

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[80] Alb., *Lidhja e Prizrenit*. Alliance of Albanian beys founded in 1878 as a reaction to the decisions of the Treaty of Santo Stefano and the Congress of Berlin which redefined the borders of the Ottoman Empire and neighboring countries. The League asked for Albanian autonomy in the Ottoman Empire and awakened demands for self-determination.
[81] A well-known restaurant in central Prizren.
[82] Albanian casseroles.

Mark Baskin: Yeah.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Because you just told us how you conceptualized the law to two bring two people together basically. But what about other fields? You have to basically consult the older law. The current, what was the current law to be able to create something that would fit this new society that you were here to set up.

Mark Baskin: So, at the broadest levels, I was not involved in that.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay (laughs).

Mark Baskin: I mean, it wasn't that. We brought in guys, we brought in through lawyers who had experience in international operations or whatever. And that they were trying to… and they were rewriting the law code, etcetera. The criminal code, and then there's the civil code. And we did our best. And when I look back at what we did in '99-2000, it was all sort of like a bandaid. It was a stopgap while something better, I mean, something more enduring could be created. Because nothing really enduring could actually begin to be created until January of 2000, when they created the PISG, the Provisional Institutions of Self-Governance.

And so everything that we did before was sort of… and we did. We did do some stuff. I mean, I created a municipal council in Prizren, but there were some difficulties. And one of the things that I did with the division of labor between me and the regional administrator was that he was the senior administrative guy from Sweden, and so he knew how to run big organizations. And I established municipal councils in all those municipalities: in Suva Reka, Rahovec, Malishevë, and Dragaš, and so I would go visit. And we would… you know, we met people there, and we would see who are the various political parties and others who are the business people and people who had worked in the administration before 1990. And we tried to set things up.

My approach was… to me, what had happened from the period of 1989 to 1999 was a period of irregular… I refer to it as a kind of system of "socialist apartheid," or whatever you want to call it. But it was… you know, when all of the ethnically Albanian people were fired and other people were brought in, I thought that what we should do to start the new system is to return to the status quo ante and to go back to where it was before. So what we tried… what I tried to do is to get all of the managers and directors to return to Perlonka, and to Termokos and to Printeks and all those. The big… .

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you have, at the time, a vision for these corporate, socially-owned corporations? I mean, as an administrator, was it part of your job to think about the economy as well?

Mark Baskin: Yeah. It wasn't… yes, but we ended up… over time, people came in who were theoretically experts in those kinds of areas, but early on, you know, you did everything. And we were trying to reestablish, you know, we were trying to get things going. I mean, we organized, we negotiated the sale of wine, because there was all this wine in the area. Leonard, my Swedish boss, he brought in a Swedish wine vinter who came. This is one of the best afternoons I spent because we went to all the vineyards in the area from Suva Reka to… we didn't go to Rahovec, because… oh no, [we did go to] Rahovec. We didn't go to Gjakovë because that was not our region. And we went wine

tasting. And we all got really lit drunk, while this wine taster would drink the wine and, you know, spit it out (chuckles).

And we determined the wine was quite good and then we began… and then there were these traditional markets for this wine in Germany and other places, and so then there were efforts to… you know, we were the government and we were in charge of that. And my feeling was that the people that were in positions of authority before 1989 should return, and then whatever was going to happen would happen. I also knew when it came to businesses, having seen what happened in other places in Yugoslavia and in Eastern Europe, that most of the socialist businesses were not very profitable, etcetera. So there would need to be that kind of transition as well. But I felt that the people who should be at least there initially were the ones who had been there before.

And so my whole approach to the government… this was my own thing, I mean. I told my various people that that was what I was trying to do, but, you know, different people in different regions, they found different ways of doing it, I suppose. But, you know, we tried to bring in the old team, and I don't know how well it worked, but that's what we tried to do.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was your relationship with the provisional government in 2000 and onward? Like, was there a…

Mark Baskin: Actually, it was from June '99 onwards. You're thinking about the provisional government led by Prime Minister [Hashim] Thaçi?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yeah, it was like a parallel institution like local, and then there was UNMIK. About it? So how did that…

Mark Baskin: This is one of those areas where I don't want to go into too much detail.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay.

Mark Baskin: Just to say, it was clear under Security Council Resolution 1244 that was supported by the full range of powerful governments and the Security Council and everyone, that the authority was had by the UN, and that we were to establish an interim administration, and that we were to help train them. And so when people presented themselves to us to say, "Well, we're the guys that are in power. But thank you. You know, we want to work with you, but, in fact, we're the ones." And so we tried to integrate with them as much as possible, but it was a difficult time. And sometimes people were… there were others that were not, you know… and so we wanted to bring everyone in.

And early on, one of the things that I did was… so everyone meant… there were all these really small little parties that don't exist anymore that I can't remember the names of. Some of them are really radical parties. Some are some Enverist parties of some sort. And then there was… you know, LDK was a big party. PDK didn't exist yet. AAK[83] didn't exist yet. Ramush [Haradinaj] was for a while head of the *TMK*, or the KPC,[84] in Prizren, and he used to meet with us weekly before he left and then, you know, began to pursue his career in politics. So we tried to integrate them all. We would have liked to have

[83] Alb., *Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës* (The Alliance for the Future of Kosovo)
[84] Alb., *Trupat Mbrojtëse të Kosovës* (Kosovo Protection Corps)

integrated the Serb structures, those who remained, and there were a few Serbs who remained, and as long as they remained in Prizren, they were part of our team too.

Early on, we had two or three of what we called roundtables symbolically modeled after what they had done in Poland. The idea is that you bring everybody and try to get what you need to do. You know, what should we do? And early on, we had everybody. We even had some Serb, we had Orthodox Church people there. We had… in Prizren, it was pretty diverse ethnically. We had Bosniaks and, you know, Gorani, and…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Turkish.

Mark Baskin: Obviously, Turkish. And, you know, so…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was it easier? Do you have a comparative perspective to say whether it was easier than in other places to bring these people to the same table?

Mark Baskin: Well, what happened is that over time some of the people left. I mean, the Orthodox Church men left, for example. And so they were no longer there, but the Turks remained. And there were, and you know, there were two contending Bosniak parties at the time, and this was before Vakat was created, but there were these other guys. And so, as long as I was there, I went out of my way to try to bring in, to keep it as diverse as possible ethnically and to make sure that the people that have had, to make sure that Prizren remained Prizren (smiles). You know, and I don't know how successful I was at that, but… or we were. It's not just me.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were there killings at the time? Like, I recall this Commander Drini killed at home. I'm wondering were you there at that time, or whether this happened later?

Mark Baskin: No, that happened when I was there.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Oh.

Mark Baskin: I knew him quite well.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you guys handle that? Did your mission permit you to act in those situations? How did you manage?

Mark Baskin: They still have not…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Huh?

Mark Baskin: There's been a couple of trials over the murder of Ekrem Rexha, who was Commandant Drini, but they still haven't concluded the case. And he was someone who worked very closely with us. He was an amazing, I thought an amazingly gifted guy. And I don't know what to say. I mean, I know a lot about this. And I remember the day that he was shot. I was the acting regional administrator at the time, Leonard was away. And after the morning meeting, we had "morning prayers," as we'd call them. We had morning meetings every day: What's going on, who's doing what, blah, blah, blah. And at the

end of the morning meeting, my interpreter came, translator came and said, "Ekrem's been shot. And he's at the German medical facility."

So I went, and he was dead. And he… his brother was there, who'd just come from Sarajevo, so that was the first time I met him. Ruzhdi. And then I went to visit the family. And for me, it was one of the most depressing moments of my entire UN mission because he was someone whose English, which was like yours {gestures at Erëmirë Krasniqi}. His English was almost perfect.

You know, his mother was from Drenica. His father was Slavic Muslim. So he spoke, he was a *JNA*[85] officer from former [Yugoslavia]. He had served in Croatia, so we used to joke, you know, speaking, *Zagrebačka šatra* and stuff. We would speak all this slang. And he was very creative. He was really kind of an impressive guy. And who knows what would have happened had he stayed alive because lots of things have happened.

But I had wanted… I was looking into trying to send him to Harvard to go to this mid-career [master's]… I mean, he was the kind of guy who could have… you know, who would have done well. Shpend Ahmeti[86] later went to that. I think he would have done very well there. And so, you know, I was writing off to my academic friends in the States to see what we could do because I knew that there was [potential]. So it's a really sad moment.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were there more of these?

Mark Baskin: Not too many. There were some. There were some cases of Bosniaks in Tusus, in the Tusus area. And that's another case that hasn't been solved, I think in January 2000. The Skënderi family. I was looking at this recently again. There were three people killed. No one's ever found who did it. And, you know, the Tusus area of Prizren is the kind of area that was a bit wild towards the construction and all that, and it was ethnically mixed. So, at the time, you know, we tried to do things. When you take an event like this… and they came and met with me, the Bosniaks. And so I would try to set up kind of neighborhood policing things.

And then I met with the kind of arm… I was still… I was not yet the municipal administrator, so I was doing this from the region. And so I met with the guys from the Municipality, and they said, "Are you willing to, you know {brings hands together} some common projects?" You know, fixing the school, cleaning up a park, you know, trying to have some things where they'd work together. And they said they would do it, and then I'm not sure what happened, you know, because I was quite senior. And so I would get something going and then I would give it to them and then who knows what would happen. And, in the end, a lot of these initiatives that I thought… didn't get fully realized.

[The story continues in part five]

Part Five

[85] Serbian: *Jugoslovenska Narodna Armija* (Yugoslav People's Army).
[86] The Mayor of Pristina.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How were you guys identifying what should be done? Were people coming to you, or were you reaching out? Or how were you making sense of your mission here?

Mark Baskin: Oh my. Well, you have an agenda. The agenda's determined by Pristina, and then you have things that you want to do, and then there's, you know… and then there's crises. So like the assassination of Ekrem, Commandant Drini. It was a crisis. All of a sudden, that's what you do. We had a whole weekly plan (chuckles), and then all of sudden that gets thrown out the window for this. Or when the, you know, there's a… so that's how it happened. And there were lots of organizations at the time I remember, so there were these… there's a confusion.

So here was a confusion that took place: The Germans set up somewhere in Korisha, which is this village near, sort of on the way in near Prizren. They had set up a shooting range for their military. And so… you know, because the military has to continue to train and they do have this right, so they have a shooting range. It's what you do. The military does things like that. And so, all of a sudden one day, Flaka Surroi[87] is there. She was working for the World Bank community development program at the time, and she was angry too, because she said, you know, we… because the World Bank, this community development program, like USAID, had this rapid response program, they would go into villages and they'd say… they'd meet, have several meetings with people, and they'd say, "What kinds of things do you need, and how can we help restore kind of normal life?"

And so what they were going to do in Korisha at the place where the Germans had the… put the firing range, they were going to have a garbage dump, and there was a tremendous need for garbage dumps. There was… I remember she drove into Prizren from Pristina. There's this… you'd see these plastic bags floating up. It was really unpleasant, and, you know, no one's taking care of this stuff, right, especially from March 23, '99 to June 10,[88] there's nothing. And then when we came in, there was still nothing, because there's no one yet, and it took us quite a while to build up. And so I went to many hours of meetings on garbage, for example (chuckles). And so they wanted to put up a garbage dump, but it was there in the shooting range, so that led to a week or two of talks between the Germans and the World Bank and all this.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: An international affair (laughs).

Mark Baskin: Yeah, it was really. Well, it's…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You had to figure out what to do with the garbage. And how… what did you do next, or maybe do you want to still stay in this period?

Mark Baskin: Well, this was the end of my UN time, and this was the end of my time here. And there were many things that we did. We brought in… one of the things that Commandant Drini did with us was, I have a friend, a Canadian, and I later went to work for them, for the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre in Nova Scotia in Canada, and they had really tremendous programs, where they would have these kind of executive-level training programs and did stuff… and they were trying to do stuff in the field. So this friend of mine said, "Well, we're getting into DDR." And it was this… disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs, and they're developing this whole program on DDR. I

[87] A notable Kosovar Albanian publisher.
[88] The period of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War.

said, "Fantastic." And they said… I said, "Would they want to come to Prizren?" I'm talking to my friend there, he goes, "We can't pay for them. But if they came to Prizren, we would do everything, lots of in-kind support."

So, you know, PPC paid for them to come. We met them in Skopje. You know, I… and then they came and spent two to three weeks working with Commandant Drini, or Ekrem Rexha, with demobilized KLA[89] guys, and then things to do. So we did stuff like that. That was really a cool thing. And so, I don't know… But a lot of it was just trying to keep balls in the air while these broader systems were in place. And then the UN then did its things, some of it really good, some of it not so good, you know, in different places. And…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When did you leave? And where did you go from there?

Mark Baskin: So I left in November 2000, and I went to Canada. That's when I went to work for the PPC. Because after we did that, they invited me to do a course on civil-military cooperation, and so I did a course. And then they were looking for someone to be a research director. I am an academic by training, so it all kind of worked, and I went there. And so…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How long did you stay there?

Mark Baskin: I was there for two years. I had other options that I might have done, and you sometimes wonder whether you make the right choice. And so, you know, I could have gone down to Washington and done stuff there too. But at the time, it's up… well, so you were up in Dartmouth,[90] right?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yeah.

Mark Baskin: So Nova Scotia's just further up.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yeah.

Mark Baskin: And it was kind of… for someone who had been working in a war for several years, it seemed to be really like this idyllic place that turned out to be… you know, I kind of wish I were in a city. I'm basically a city boy, but it was okay. It was nice.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was it cold?

Mark Baskin: No, because they have the Gulf Stream that comes up. So the line in Nova Scotia is "If you don't like the weather, then wait for 10 minutes." So the winter's not too cold. The winter's, you know… although we'd do these trainings and we'd bring in all these officers from Africa and Latin America right near the Equator in the middle of the winter time, and they didn't have warm jackets, so we would have to do stuff like that.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was your family following you, or they were based in the U.S.?

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[89] Kosovo Liberation Army.

[90] Dartmouth College, a private research university in Hanover, New Hampshire, in the northeastern United States.

Mark Baskin: My family, they came to Zagreb and then we moved to Osijek. They were with me in Osijek and then in Sarajevo. And then one of the reasons I left is that there was really no place to bring them here. It wasn't really ready to bring them, and Suzanne didn't want to… she… I could have… a lot of people had their families in Skopje, and that meant every Friday afternoon, they would go to Skopje. But I was the kind of person, when I worked, I worked 14 hours a day. And my idea of… and I often worked on weekends.

And so what I did for a while in the fall of '99 is that every Sunday, a group of us would go out to different village, and we'd go meet the people, and I would ask them, "What was it like here during the war?," and they would explain to me. Then, I would tell them about what we were doing. This was all informal. I just did this because I was interested in doing it and trying to kind of promote the UN program. I deeply believed we could succeed against all… you know, like a second marriage, they say it's the triumph of hope over experience, you know. I really believed that we could make it work, and so I was doing all that. And…

And so I didn't want to have my family in Skopje. They didn't want to go. So they were in the States. And then, when I got the job in Canada, we reunited. That was about… we were… so I would go back to the States every, I don't know, six weeks or so for 10 days.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What happened with you between this period, since 2002 up to when… 2013, you said, is when you came again to Kosovo?

Mark Baskin: Yeah, yeah, well, actually, I was in Kosovo between then too.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Oh.

Mark Baskin: I did various things.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Really?

Mark Baskin: Yeah.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us more about them?

Mark Baskin: I did an assessment of the judiciary in 2001. I was giving you some of the stuff. I have that… for the Canadian government that's been published on the World Bank Rule of Law website. I did a USAID… I was part of a team that did an assessment on the return of minorities to Kosovo. And on that, because the people that you work with… Enver Hoxhaj[91] was part of that team, so I got to know him. I worked very closely with Enver for about three weeks on that in… that must have been 2003. And then…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: There were a lot of shortages in electricity. How did you even manage that while you were municipal administrator?

[91] A high-ranking Kosovar Albanian politician.

Mark Baskin: Oh we had a… yeah, that's a good point. There was a… we had generators. In our headquarters, we had generators. I didn't in my house. I mean, I lived… the winter of '99-2000, which was a cold winter, I had no heat, no hot water. I took cold showers. I took colder showers for the winter in a house with no heat. I had blankets this thick {holds hands far apart}, and I would come home… so I would only come home to sleep. And I had a beautiful house. Early on, I rented this really beautiful house. I had a roommate, you know, also from the UN. And then I would get into the covers and it would take about two minutes and then my body heat would keep me warm. And I'd get up, and I would take a shower every other day because it was incredibly painful, and I didn't really need it. And so it was cold. It was a really cold winter. But all the electricity we had in our headquarters, in our offices. And there was nothing…

And other people I would visit, and they would invite me over and stuff, they had made all kinds of accommodations with stoves and things like that, but I didn't do it because I wasn't there to be at home. I mean, so I would get into work at 7:30-8:00 in the morning and I would go home at 9:00-10:00 at night, so that was my daily routine. And then I would… I had these little flashlights, and I would go to bed trying to read and I'd fall asleep quickly after a good evening with Syla, you know. Syla would force me to drink scotch (laughs}, and…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: There were many accidents at the time also because of the electricity shortage, you know, because of the whole…

Mark Baskin: Yeah, there was stuff. There's a lot of things that went on, and over time I forget some of the stuff. I know we had… you know, it was difficult… it was a difficult time. Early on in the mission, we were all like one family, because there weren't that many expats. We had a large national staff. And there was still the sense in which everyone was… we believed we could be successful and so that… we all lived our lives all together, but over time, the expats kind of wanted to separate themselves off, and that's around the time I left. I… yeah, anyways, that's around the time I left. I wasn't particularly supportive of that, and I did believe that, if you could identify the right kind of people to work with… and it didn't really matter… the right kind of people were the people who demonstrated that they were interested in doing the right things, that you really could do really good things. But there were lots of ways in which… Prizren was just a small… was just one little place, and the larger flow of events was being determined in Pristina.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were you traveling to Pristina often?

Mark Baskin: Yeah, weekly. We would go to a weekly meeting. And at the time, it would sometimes take two- two-and-a-half hours because, you know, you'd drive through the Dulje[92] Pass, you know, and the roads were terrible, really bad. And then you would get behind these German military convoys, so you'd be going 10-15 kilometers per hour. And then when you get to Shtime, it's just holes, rivers, lakes in the roads. Suva Reka had terrible roads at the time too, so it was just…

Yeah, we'd go to Pristina, we'd meet with the… you know.. .but I became a real Prizrenac, you know. My friends would say, you know, "I worked in Pristina for 20 years. I never once slept there," you know, stuff like that. And I didn't, I felt at home in Prizren, and I didn't, you know, particularly like Pristina. And in Prizren, I'm, everyone, you know, you couldn't, you know, I speak Serbo-Croatian, and I would

[92] A village located at the midpoint of the road between Prizren and Pristina.

never go up to someone I didn't know and speak. And I would never go into a store and speak it. But, you know, when you meet someone, etcetera, and you realize, well, that's the language you can communicate, you could do that really easily. But I would never do that in Pristina. I mean…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were you afraid that you could endanger somebody, even in Prizren, if you talk to them in Serbo-Croatian?

Mark Baskin: I was threatened by some people who'd say,… well, I mean, "God, you're really brave to speak that language," people would say to me sometimes, people who wanted me to think that I was their friend, or they wanted… You know, there's a lot of trauma, which is understandable. And, you know, I've learned this especially since I've returned. You know, you talk to people who were political prisoners and then you… we met people there would do that as well.

But just coming back, you know, I met these guys at Martini[93] one night, folk singers, and they began singing for us. And we're talking, so we could speak in Croatian, so we're speaking Croatian, and we spent the night… this was entirely by chance. And they began telling me about what would happen to them in the '90s, and they'd go out and the policemen would see them and just say, "What are you doing out?" "Oh, I'm just going here." Okay, well, you know, they'd get beaten up, or they were taken to jail because they were breaking their curfew. It was all sorts of stuff like that, and I assume that that was not a unique case that that happened.

You know, I talked to someone who is influential now, told me when he was a kid in the '80s, late '80s,… this was even before then… he defaced something, you know, "Tito socializëm i mirë"[94] or something like that, you know. Four years in jail for defacing. I mean, you know, it's not… he should have been fined somehow or made to do some whatever. But so, you know, there's stuff like that. And so there are these traumas. And then you hear what happened in Krusha or what happened in Orahovec after the, you know… and so there's all these things. And so I don't, you know… And I know I went back, I organized the visit of the Iowa National Guard to the states. I did this for the last two years. And Ukshin Hoti's[95] daughter was my student. And so, when I did this, I wanted to take them to Krusha to meet… there's this amazing… you know this story, that woman-led business where they make *ajvar*.[96] It's fantastic. It's a tremendous story on so many levels.

And so I hadn't been in Krusha since 2000, '99-2000, and I went, and Brisilda arranged for me to meet her uncle, who was someone, and then I met the guy who's now the head of the village. And they came up to me, they say, you know, "Mr. Baskin," they go, "I remember I talked to you in 1999." And, you know, I remember going there, and there was still really early on, when ICDI[97] was here doing investigations about these kinds of massacres and stuff. So that… and so, and people remember that… so these people that remember me remember that I was this sort of sense of stability and kind of positive thing, so that's kind of nice. But the sense of trauma was really great, so in that sense, it was

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[93] A small grill house in central Pristina.
[94] Albanian for "Tito's socialism is good."
[95] Ukshin Hoti (1943-199), philosopher and politicians, was sentenced to five years in prison in 1994. He disappeared at the time of his release and his whereabouts are still unknown.
[96] Red pepper paste widely eaten in the Balkans.
[97] International Child Development Initiatives, a Dutch NGO dedicated to the development of children and young people growing up in difficult conditions.

a difficult time. It was a difficult time, you know, for them and for you all, in particular, because… and, anyway…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I mean, was it difficult to present certain ideas that were more inclusive and kind of imagined others as well? Others, non-Albanians. Or you weren't doing that at the time? You were just…

Mark Baskin: We tried to do it. I mean, I had a guy… I mean, in the Municipality of Prizren… so I was the municipal administrator. I had three vice presidents: one was Albanian… well, just you know, to give that, it was very Titoist (chuckles). I had an Albanian, I had a Turk, and I had a Bosniak. And the Albanian and the Turk had known each other for a long time. And you know, they were both part of… active… my Turkish guy, you know, he was a political prisoner in the '90s and all this. And this guy, Shazir Shaipi is his name. He was a great guy.

And… and we… I needed to… I wanted to find a Bosniak. And so I had… you know, I had these two contending political parties. They wanted to be the one (chuckles), and I decided I didn't want either of them (chuckles) because we're going to be apolitical. So I asked the people I was working with, I said, "We need to find somebody who is a Bosniak who gets along well with everybody. And if they could speak Albanian, it would be fantastic," and they found someone, some guy who had worked at "Balkan". He was from Župa valley, and he was great. He was really good.

And so, you know, that's the kind of the way we tried to get stuff done. And you can kind of see in Prizren the way in which Yugoslavia sort of worked.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How so?

Mark Baskin: Well, so I had friends who would say… there were three of us. Two were Albanian and one was a Turk. And they were all the same generation. And they said one of them went to the Turkish high school, one of them went to the Albanian high school, and one of them went to the Serbian high school. And… one of them went to university in Zagreb, one of them went to university in Belgrade, I think…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In Zagreb?

Mark Baskin: Two of them went to Zagreb. Not sure where Vučko went. Vučko's brother went to Belgrade. And, you know, I mean, they were all citizens. They were all kind of urb-city people, and so they were part of that kind of elite group. But there was a real sense of civic pride. There was a real sense that… and they were open in many ways. And… so I just thought that. I don't know…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When did you come back to really move in?

Mark Baskin: 2014.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Like, since then you've been here constantly?

Mark Baskin: Well, I leave, but yeah. Yeah, yeah, I've been living here since 2014. And…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you decide?

Mark Baskin: I got a job.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay.

Mark Baskin: I mean, I was at a point in… I was… so I spent… After I left, just quickly from my biography, after I left Canada, I went to work in… my ex-wife's from Upstate New York, around Schenectady-Albany region, and so we just bought a house. And I got a job at the State University of New York at Albany, where I worked for about… so I don't know, until I left, doing international development stuff, and I was also teaching in the political science department. And with state universities, budgeting is always an exciting thing (chuckles). And so I'm not sure how much longer I could have stayed on doing that. But I, you know, was like… and the job… so I began looking around for work, and I got this job where I met you {gestures at Erëmirë Krasniqi} originally, and then I moved over to AUK.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I mean, when you're doing these teaching jobs, do they… does this experience inform the way you design courses? How do you integrate it into your teaching?

Mark Baskin: So when I came back… you know, I was a full-time academic before I went to work for the UN. And what I teach is completely different now. The only course that I continue to teach… and I didn't do this at Albany. They didn't want me to teach this course. That was a bit, you know… was comparative politics, introduction to comparative politics. But when I was at Albany, I was teaching courses on post-conflict reconstruction. I was teaching courses on war and peace. I did stuff on ethnic conflict, which I had never really taught before. Whereas, before I would teach courses on… because I was trained to do Soviet studies, I would teach courses on Soviet foreign… Russian foreign policy, Russian-American relations, comparative politics, and, you know…

And then I was teaching at this really small school where you could do whatever you want, so I taught a course… and they wouldn't let me teach it at Albany… a course on political film, which I love teaching the course on political film. And… so, you know… So then, when I've been here, I taught what they needed. So I've taught a course on global political economy, comparative politics, public policy, which I'd taught in the old days as well. And I teach a course on Balkan history. I, we, it didn't work out. I wanted to bring you [Erëmirë Krasniqi] in, maybe this year, if I teach it again, to do, because they did oral history. They did, I gave them a little… it turned out to be a really good assignment. You know, some of the kids, they don't get interested in anything, but some of the kids really got off on it. You know, they… I asked them to study, to ask people over a certain age their memories of socialism.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay.

Mark Baskin: And some kids really got into it. It's really quite interesting how you can really look into the social backgrounds of your students when you read this assignment, so…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you continue with your, so how was this USAID project where you were giving scholarships?

Mark Baskin: Yeah, we were giving scholarships. And it was okay. It was fine, you know, but in the end, I left that. And…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: It was quite open as a program as I recall. It wasn't just…

Mark Baskin: It was. But the problem as a whole… this gets into a whole different conversation about the nature of development and the nature of development assistance. And "We've given you so many billions of dollars," and you think about the billions of dollars that the EU and different governments have given, how much of that money goes to salaries of people like me? How much of that money actually goes to programming? And when it turns out… I mean, I worked on USAID projects for many years… it turns out that like 10-20 percent actually goes to projects, to programs. The rest of it goes to all sorts of other kinds of stuff. And you can say it's good, it's fine, but is it?

And (chuckles) so this program ended up sending you… and you're a great example {pointing at Erëmirë Krasniqi} because you went and you did that, so you're now doing something that's really cool and that's useful and that's important here. And that ought to in some ways… in some other country, it [Oral History Initiative] could be part of the University of Prishtina. I mean, depending on… maybe it still could depending on how things evolve in the sense that, because… you know, there are all these things, and I'm sure you know about this in the United States: National Public Radio[98] has these various archives. People tell their stories. I mean, it's a similar kind of thing, and so it's a really tremendous resource.

But a lot of people come, they… we send people off. This was supposed to be a practical program, so we sent people off to study things that weren't necessarily so practical. And then people then go study one thing and they come back and they don't really… so it's really hard to say and… On the other hand, I think it's always a good idea that people can go… you know, I think the programs that we send people to are pretty good programs, and people did well, so that it's always good to enhance that capacity of people. I'm thinking of, for example, someone like… and, you know, I'm thinking of someone in your cohort who then went to work for the Foreign Minister, Besart.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Ah.

Mark Baskin: Yeah. But he's not the only one that went. You know, he did a master's degree at Denver,[99] which is a great school, and now he's… now he's privatizing. Or he's not working for the Government anymore, and it's unfortunate, someone of his capacity. That's just one case. And I just… because I know him a little bit. And so that's how I know that. So you try to feed it back. And, by the way, the program that we ran, it's similar… all the universities. I sent a student this year, who's now up in Brussels studying, getting a master's degree at Leuven. Actually, Leuven. And when he comes back, he's going to have to work, you know… supposedly, he's going to have work for the Government for two or three years.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Three years, all three, yeah, I know that. That scheme, you know.

[98] A publicly and privately funded U.S. radio network.
[99] The Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver.

Chester Eng: Young Cell Scheme.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yeah, yeah.

Mark Baskin: That's a good scheme. Although, in his case, we want to send him to the States to do a doctorate in history because he would like to, but we'll see. He's still young.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What… how do you make sense of your life in this last chapter?

Mark Baskin: So, for me, it's my own personal thing, it's that, you know, it was that serendipity brought me to the Balkans in 1975. And I never really… I didn't know anything really about Yugoslavia at the time or anything like that. And yet I have sort of become very… I feel very local in a way, even though I'm not. I know I'm not. And I… so, for me, I feel it's… I can't imagine doing anything that's more personally fulfilling than what I'm doing now, both teaching and whatever consulting I do, work I do. And so…

And I think that this isn't the only place that has been wrecked and destroyed by war and conflict and all this. There's plenty of places all over the world that's… where things are really horrible, and so… but this happens to be the place, and I have this desire to kind of try, you know, to improve the world I live in. And so this is the place that I'm at, and I'm trying to make whatever small contribution… I mean, it's pretty small (chuckles)…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How's your work with students here? Anything in particular? Is it any different than the U.S.?

Mark Baskin: Yes. I used to say no, but it is different. I mean, starting off is that, because we teach in English, and people here are poor, and I give my kids several hundred dollars a semester to buy books. I mean, you can spend 200 dollars for books on one course in the States. And so you can spend as much as 700-800 dollars on a course. We can't do that here. And then, of course, and it's not a trend… I haven't taught in the U.S. now for a few years… but people don't read much anymore. And so getting students… and, at the end of the day, it's important to read. I mean, there's different ways of bringing in information, and reading is a very effective way of one aspect of learning. And so that's a difficult challenge.

And I have some students who are as good, are among the very best students I have ever taught, since the 1980s. It's really true. I'm not just saying that. But then I have the master's students that sort of are not among the very best students I've taught. And so there's that. And… but, overall, I mean… and then you see things, I see things here that, I guess in the States we had it like at AUK, you see that you have, like, friends. There's a couple of boys that take all their classes together, or a couple of girls who take all their classes together, and so then you have this sort of thing. You know, then there's this kind of … there's a whole social dimension, which a good anthropologist, a good ethnographer can really get into in a way. And so… yeah.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How would you describe maybe… not the background because that's not something short. But how do you make sense of 2000 and 2020 now? Does it make sense where we're at, in your view? For this time we live, and you started off, and where you're…

Mark Baskin: So, in 2000, when I came in here, everyone was hopeful. Everyone, except… yeah, everyone was hopeful. I didn't deal with the Serb community, but they were not very hopeful I would say, 2000. But everyone else I dealt with was hopeful and believed that things would be a lot better. And now, I would say everyone's not hopeful, that there are still some… there's still some hopeful. The amount of hope has gone down, that people are a little more jaded.

And I would say this, and I would say in part, it would be a mistake to expect Kosovo to have developed at the maximum level of its potential, because no place does. And you look at the evolution of European societies, or America, or the United States, it took several hundred years for us to become democratic. And it wasn't only because we had never figured it out, but it's just because, over generations… it takes sometimes a whole generation for people to change how they do things, and it's just a question of a cultural change. And so that takes a long time. And so I don't see any reason why we should expect everyone here to be so much better than we were (chuckles), and that's kind of what we're expecting of you when we say that.

And so then I look at… you know, and I know a lot of people here, and people who are in all the political parties and different governments and stuff, so some people feel that they're more virtuous than others, that they're criminals, and we're not. And I think that… I look at the United States, and I look at the kind of legislation that was passed in the 1780s and '90s. And then you look at the various financial scandals in the United States throughout our history, and you look at the way in which the Rockefeller Brothers, what a virtuous organization. How did the Rockefellers make their money? They were called robber barons.[100] So why should we expect people here to be somehow… to avoid the mistakes that others have made? And so to me, I'm… and so that, in some broader sense, I remain incredibly optimistic.

And I think that at each moment, we need to act. And there are traditions here that are not necessarily conducive to the development of British-American style liberal democracy. I mean, this was part of the Ottoman Empire, you know, etcetera. You look at… I went back and read all this medieval history when I began teaching the Balkan studies class. And then you go back to the Byzantian, you look at just the administrative units going back to Byzantine times to the present, very little has changed. You changed the names of them, but, you know, they used to have these things, you know, the *vilayets*[101] evolved out of the Byzantine form of organization. And so why should things be so much different now?

And so that, to the extent I do believe that democracy, liberal democracy, if it can work, is a pretty good system, because it allows individuals to rise and fall and all this, and that we've… but, you know, when we see the challenges in my country right now, and it's difficult to maintain those organizations, you know, those institutions, and those ways. And so, as I look at the track record here, it's easy to say… there's this blame game that goes on, that people here blame the EU, and the UN for all this terrible stuff. But the UN and the EU had tremendous success. We had tremendous failures too, but there were many things that we did that were successful. And it's easy to point to all the things that we did wrong. It's easy to point to ways in which we formed relationships that might not have been all

[100] A derogatory term applied to 19th-century U.S. businessmen who were accused of using immoral and unfair methods to acquire, or expand, their wealth.
[101] Major administrative units established Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 19th century.

that well. But, you know, virtue is not necessarily so virtuous. Robespierre,[102] he was acting in the name of virtue, so it's important to, we don't want to kill everybody (smiles).

But I think things here are okay. I think, over the long run, I think things, I mean, I think that, and so much of what happens here will depend on forces that are entirely out of the control of people here: the Eurozone, what relations with China, Russia, U.S., all those certain broader things require a certain context, and I think that… I'm hopeful that… that will continue to be moving up and that the new Government will do some… will have some success…

[The video interview was edited here]

Yeah, so what happened was, we're there and then sometime in the late summer of '99, this guy who worked for the American Jewish [Joint] Distribution Committee… oh, I forgot his name now. Darn it. I can remember it and tell you… he came to Prizren, and they wanted to celebrate, they wanted to have a Rosh Hashanah dinner. And he had known somehow that I was Jewish, and he had known about Votim Demiri who's now president of the [Jewish Community of Kosovo]. And, you know, Votim's a prominent personality in Prizren even before.

And… Eli Eliezri was his name. He was an Israeli, Eli Eliezri. And so Eli said, "Come on." He was one of these kind of really upbeat Israelis, you know, just total energy. And we had this dinner where we had Votim and I think Votim's family and then a few others. And it turned out there were two to three bigger Jewish kind of families in Prizren. And there's a bunch who had made *aliyah*[103] in '47-'48 from Prizren, so there was a sort of *kibbutz*[104] or something. There were the Bosnian Jews in Israel and I think there were some Kosovo Jews as well. And I know some Croatian Jews through a friend of mine who told me, this really good friend. So…

And so we had this dinner, and to me it was totally bizarre. And all of a sudden, he calls, Eli calls this guy who had been an Israeli Minister of Education who was involved in something, I think some Geneva Convention process or something. And he says, "Here, you should talk with him!" And so we're talking, we're talking about Kosovo and all this. And so, and then Eli was telling me that he thought it was important that they wanted to be there, and they wanted to be there in part to show, you know… because there was a Jewish community… and that they wanted to give them support. But they also wanted to work… one of the many things that the American Jewish Distribution Committee did, something… they're all over… is they were putting computers in schools.

And then he told me that they were helping to rebuild a mosque, or they wanted to. And the idea was that what we want to do is create a multiethnic, you know, kind of thing, that we want to… and so… and he did it for explicit political reasons. It was this idea that in places like that a minority is protected. So that was kind of cool. And then for Passover the next year. Did you ever go to a Passover Seder {point at Erëmirë Krasniqi}?

[102] Maximilien Robespierre, a French lawyer and statesman who was best known for his role during the Reign of Terror of the French Revolution, during which he oversaw the arrests and executions of numerous political opponents.
[103] Hebrew: *aliyah,* ascent or rise, the immigration of Jews to Israel.
[104] Hebrew: *kibbutz,* gathering, a collective community settlement, usually organized around agriculture.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I think I did.

Mark Baskin: That's great because they always end up next year in Jerusalem and stuff. And so Passover Seder, which tells the story of the Jews', you know, escape from Egypt. So for Passover we had a much bigger thing. And again, all of our friends, you know, all the people I was friends with, we brought in, and Eli would always get all the expat Jews to come to these events (chuckles). And so we did it at some restaurant or something in Prizren. And he had some Albanian Jew, a Jewish woman from Albania who had moved to Israel, and then we did a small little Seder. And then she talked about what it was like being Jewish in Albania, etcetera, etcetera, and all that. So that's kind of what we did at the end. And I know that Eli very much… and so Votim saw that, in the end, that would be his way of working, and his daughter Ines who, you know, works in the Kosovo consulate in New York, and she's now very active. So one time, about a year or so ago, I was in Liburnia,[105] and Ines then came in with Teuta Sahatqija[106] and these kind of Jews from New York and Israel, and so we reconnected (laughs). And…

And I know they want to build a Jewish community center in Prizren. And, in a way, I think it's… there are very few Jews left in Kosovo. And so I think I mentioned this the other day, I go to Torah study when I'm back in the States. And I was thinking… when I went to… I was done with this event [International Holocaust Remembrance Day tribute in Prizren on January 27, 2020], I wanted to say, "Well, we should have Torah study." You know, it's really an incredibly engaging thing intellectually. And… but I don't think there's much interest in that.

The thing about creating a Jewish community center here is that it would commemorate a community that existed, and it would demonstrate the way in which Kosovo is home to all communities here. And that there is that cemetery up, you know, Taukbahçe[107] or wherever that is near that area. And… and so I think a Jewish community center can be a place where there can be… you know, it can be a kind of temple of tolerance. But who knows what will really happen.

I mean, I know that in places like Zagreb… I used to go to these things in Zagreb for Rosh Hashanah and stuff. And the Zagreb Jewish community and the Belgrade Jewish community have both split (chuckles). You know, you say, "If you have two Jews, three political parties," (chuckles), you know, and so there's… But I actually think that it… I think it wouldn't be… it would be… it's a nice idea, and having in Prizren rather than Pristina is also a nice idea because it brings people there. And then Prizren, at least a marker of its identity and very explicitly as a multiethnic community and all that, so I think that's…

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you have any insight into how they cultivated this sense of Jewishness? How did they reconnect to that heritage?

Mark Baskin: I think that there's been some financing from international Jewish organizations to have some… I know when I was in the States, and I wasn't able to travel, they had a big event that they invited me to and I never went to. There was some big three-day conference. And they're rekindling it now. And, you know, because to be Jewish is a matrilineal thing. And I know a lot of people who are

[105] A traditional Albanian restaurant in central Pristina.
[106] The Consul General of the Kosovar consulate in New York.
[107] A park near the center of Pristina.

active in the Zagreb Jewish communities whose fathers were Jewish and mothers weren't, but they were still active. And the Orthodox rabbis in Israel would not accept them, but that we… the name Sternberg would say that they are Jewish and all that. And so I don't know.

I do think that if there's going to be a vital community that there would need to be some slight… you know, in Sarajevo, we used to go to services where there'd be real Rosh Hashanah, there'd be a Seder, where you're doing it in the proper way, you know, where at least the ritual is done. You know, there's a wide variety of how a ritual can be done for each of these, but they should do it in some way. In fact, I'm going to be in touch with Votim. It's about… because Passover's coming up in another month, so we'll see. We'll do a Seder together (smiles).

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Mark, I think we should wrap up here.

Mark Baskin: Thanks for coming.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Thank you, thank you for your time.

Mark Baskin: Yeah, my pleasure, it's been nice to reconnect (smiles).