

INTERVIEW WITH LINDITA CENA

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Duration: 27 minutes

Present:

1. Lindita Cena (Speaker)
2. Aurela Kadriu (Interviewer)
3. Donjeta Berisha (Camera)

Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:

() – emotional communication

{ } – the speaker explains something using gestures.

Other transcription conventions:

[] – addition to the text to facilitate comprehension

Footnotes are editorial additions to provide information on localities, names or expressions.

Aurela Kadriu: Okay, could you introduce yourself and describe to us some memories from your childhood, what do you remember? Such as your family background, the place where you grew up, and where you were born, and the stories through which you remember your childhood, or the ones you can remember from your childhood?

Lindita Cena: I am Lindita Cena, I'm from Rahovec. I have a law degree. I work for a USAID project. I have finished both elementary and high school in my hometown, Rahovec, however, since I started my studies in '97, I've been in Pristina. Firstly, I will talk about the time before and after the war. In the pre-war period, so in '97, I enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine, and I have just as many good memories as bad ones there. Since the beginning, when I started as a student there, I began protesting (laughs). The student protests were held in October of '97. So that's where I began to take part in protests.

Aurela Kadriu: Can we not go there yet but stick a little to your personal story, your childhood, your family, what kind of family you grew up in, what kind of place you grew up in, and what you remember from your childhood?

Lindita Cena: Well then, I grew up during a time which was a little different from now, we didn't have phones, social media, all these things that we now use more, we spent our time doing other things, different games that we improvised ourselves. We are five children, I have two other sisters and two brothers. I'm a middle child, two older {shows with fingers} and two younger. Usually, my hometown is known as... there, people work the land. Rahovec's grapes are famous (laughs) not only in Kosovo but also abroad. As children, we tried to help our family as much as we could.

I finished elementary school normally, in the school's facility, whereas in high school I remember that I don't know what the high school facility looked like because we didn't spend a single day on the

school premises, but in private homes.¹ The conditions were extremely difficult, but our will and interest for education was very strong.

Aurela Kadriu: Did you work in vineyards as a child?

Lindita Cena: As a child yes, yes...

Aurela Kadriu: Do you remember...?

Lindita Cena: But it was more entertaining [for us children], we went out there to play in nature. So we tried to help as much as we could as children or to ruin (laughs) some work tools or something. Otherwise, there, old and young [worked the land], I'm talking about the time before the war, people of Rahovec made a living from [working] the land. They have created wealth from the land because they worked very hard. But agriculture did well back then, there was profit. So people made a living from agriculture.

Aurela Kadriu: Do you remember any special memory sequence from the work in vineyards, like as a big family?

Lindita Cena: The time of grape harvesting is the most interesting (laughs). The entire family used to organize themselves when an order was made because they exported abroad too. Other family members used to come as well, so our uncles, their children, so the entire *mahalla*² used to come. They used to come and help us during the time when we had a set date to deliver, when they would come to get the grape and export it abroad. And we did the same thing back...

Aurela Kadriu: You used to go help?

Lindita Cena: Yes, we used to go help. Besides working, it was also sort of entertaining, I don't know how to describe it when you don't, when you don't experience it yourself, but in short, in people's words, it was *shyhret i madh*³ (laughs).

Aurela Kadriu: You mentioned that you finished high school in private homes?

Lindita Cena: Yes.

¹ By 1991, after Slobodan Milošević's legislation making Serbian the official language of Kosovo and the removal of all Albanians from public service, Albanians were excluded from schools as well. The reaction of Albanians was to create a parallel system of education hosted mostly by private homes.

² Word of Arabic origin that means neighborhood.

³ An expression that is a mix of local Turkish and Albanian that takes the meaning of a great pleasure.

Aurela Kadriu: Can you tell us a bit about how the parallel system worked in Rahovec, we sort of have an idea, but we mostly have built that idea from the stories we've done in Pristina, so I'm interested to know what it was like in Rahovec?

Lindita Cena: The home-school in Rahovec where I attended high school...

Aurela Kadriu: What department?

Lindita Cena: Natural sciences.

Aurela Kadriu: Ah, gymnasium?⁴

Lindita Cena: Yes, gymnasium. It was [located] where they now call it *mahalla e shkijeve*⁵ (laughs) or don't let me mention this, but it is. It was an old house. Almost every day we waited {looks and points up with her head} if the ceiling might fall or if the walls might collapse. There were obviously no desks, but there were wooden planks where we sat, and we held our notebooks and books in our laps. There weren't many textbooks, but we studied more, so we took notes from the teachers' lectures and the notes from the blackboard, our blackboards were improvised. But, there were many shifts held in the same house.

Today, that means there is a whole generation that has finished high school in that private home. Unfortunately, I'm not sure if that house is still there because it was old, taking into account 20 years that this happened earlier, we're talking about what happened 20 years earlier. But, the teaching, so the generations came out almost... today students have everything they need, they have school facilities, they have laboratories, they have other stuff that the school needs, but studying has diminished. Whereas, back then it was [different], there were more excellent students than poor ones. There was a motive that was very strong.

Aurela Kadriu: Do you remember, when you think in retrospect, what it was like, how it manifested in society, the fact that you were going to a private home and not in a school facility? I guess that when you were in elementary school, I'm sure you said to yourself, you thought that you would attend high school in a school facility that would be more serious, it's a gymnasium, and then you found yourself in a private home.

Lindita Cena: Yes it's difficult, it's difficult because to go from the classroom to a room in a house that is improvised as a classroom is difficult, we had to deal with that fact. We knew at the time how we lived, we knew how there were some things forbidden for us. But no one could restrain our

⁴ A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

⁵ *Shka* (m.); *shkinë* (f.), plural *shkijet*, is a derogatory term in Albanian used for Serbs.

commitment to education. And this was exactly more of an encouragement than an obstacle, for example, someone stopping them from going to high school, such as parents stopping their children because of their living conditions, but they only had a push from their parents and other people and...

Aurela Kadriu: What did your parents or teachers say to you about this situation?

Lindita Cena: Well, in order to keep us motivated the teachers, well even our parents, we had our parent's support. But it was difficult because every time we had to, as I told you, we didn't even have textbooks due to political situation, but also because of the financial restrictions, there weren't many textbooks [in Albanian]. We are aware of the time when we couldn't even have the textbooks [with us] because of the check-ups.⁶ But, we always had the support and encouragement obviously. "Even though it's not a [school] facility you should study, you should get an education and finish it in this home-school."

Aurela Kadriu: Rahovec, was it more ethnically mixed?

Lindita Cena: Yes, yes. In Rahovec, I remember in Rahovec, I know that we had Serb and Bosnian neighbors and we never had issues.

Aurela Kadriu: What was it like to live in a multicultural environment?

Lindita Cena: As a child I remember it being good. We never had problems, as children we also played with children of other communities. They bought grapes or maybe something else from Albanians and vice versa. It's possible that they even went back and forth with each other, they got coffee together, they hung out together, they worked together. Until the time came that...

Aurela Kadriu: As far as you remember, did you have relationships or friendship with children of the Serb community for example, or...?

Lindita Cena: Not personally because they usually lived in apartments. And we lived in houses, maybe they were close, but we weren't directly mixed with them. But those children, the other [Albanian] children my age, those children had the chance. Especially the ones that lived in collective buildings, there were Albanians, Bosnians, and Serbs there and of course they used the space in front of the building together, they played together, they played football and...

Aurela Kadriu: I'm interested, do you have a sort of a clear moment in your memory when the relationship break happened, what happened? Why...?

⁶ During Milosević's regime, the police would conduct regular check-ups, stopping and controlling Albanian students in the street, mistreating and at times arresting them for carrying with them textbooks in Albanian language.

Lindita Cena: No. At that time unfortunately I didn't happen to be there [in Rahovec], I was here in Pristina studying. But I know it was difficult for them as well as for us because for example I don't blame my neighbors that they could do something or... that's what happened {shrugs}, politics (laughs).

Aurela Kadriu: And how, how did it come about that you came to Pristina to study, why exactly medicine?

Lindita Cena: And why exactly medicine, I wanted to be a doctor (laughs). It was more the *rreth*,⁷ my family, I had a push from my family who had some relatives that were on the medicine side, so physicians. So, "Follow their path, it's good to be a physician, a doctor," and I agreed with that. I applied, I was accepted. I attended it for about three years. And then I stopped, I realized I'm not right for medicine or medicine is not right for me. Even today when I go to the hospital... I'm not right for that profession. I saw myself and I said stop, before it's too late.

Aurela Kadriu: When you came, do you remember the first days when you came to Pristina as a student? You moved to Pristina right?

Lindita Cena: Yes, yes. I remember them more or less because it's been a long time. Yes, we moved to Pristina, I was lucky to have my sister here initially, so then I moved in with her.

Aurela Kadriu: So you weren't in the dorms?

Lindita Cena: No, I wasn't in the dorms. We were in a private apartment.

Aurela Kadriu: What was Pristina like for you at the time?

Lindita Cena: Pristina, had been a dream come true (laughs). I mean, continuing education, the faculty, I couldn't wait to start my lectures, but unfortunately even the lectures in the Faculty of Medicine, I attended in a private house, in a private house because the faculty was closed off to Albanians.

Aurela Kadriu: Where did the medicine [faculty] have its...

Lindita Cena: Somewhere in Sunny Hill, it was at...

Aurela Kadriu: Only in Sunny Hill, or you went back and forth?

⁷ *Rreth* (circle) is the social circle, it includes not only the family but also the people with whom an individual is in contact. The opinion of the *rreth* is crucial in defining one's reputation.

Lindita Cena: In Sunny Hill, in Sunny Hill. So, I finished three years of medicine, but I haven't seen a hospital once (laughs) or we didn't have an opportunity for an internship at the hospital.

Aurela Kadriu: In what year did you start?

Lindita Cena: '97.

Aurela Kadriu: You started in '97?

Lindita Cena: '97 yes, From '97 until '99 I was a student in the Faculty of Medicine.

Aurela Kadriu: What was '97 like for you, you mentioned earlier that you took part in protests as soon as you arrived?

Lindita Cena: '97 yes, as soon as I arrived, at the time of... there was Albin Kurti⁸ and these activists, maybe I don't remember someone's name, but they organized student protests. If I'm not mistaken it was October 1⁹ or later. And at the time I didn't even know Pristina's neighborhoods because it was the beginning. But the people where I lived helped me because as a student I wanted to go out (smiles) in the protests. I remember there we got a good beating (laughs) like that... And it was an indescribable feeling, a little scary too because we didn't know where to run, where to go. But fortunately we had a lot of Pristina citizens that got out in front of their houses, directed us, helped us, they gave us onions, onions for the tear gas because we were covered in tears and... And they helped us take refuge at their houses while running away from the Serb police who, who constantly chased us.

Aurela Kadriu: And what was this protest like, I mean were you in the Organizational Council,¹⁰ or what?

Lindita Cena: No, I was only participating as a student. I wasn't in the Organizational Council.

Aurela Kadriu: Do you remember the demands you pushed forward in this protest?

⁸ Albin Kurti (1975-) leading activist and former leader of Vetëvendosje!, and currently Prime Minister of Kosovo. In 1997, he was the leader of the student protests against school segregation and the closing of the Albanian language schools.

⁹ October 1, 1997 was the biggest student-led protest in which they demanded the return to university facilities.

¹⁰ Every protest organized in the 1990s had an organizational council that mobilized the masses, defined the demands and took public responsibility. The women's protests were mostly organized by the Women's Forum, part of the Democratic League of Kosovo and other informal women's groups and activists.

Lindita Cena: Look, the demands were known almost from the beginning, to be independent. For example, as a student, I demanded for the studies and lectures to be held in the appropriate facility, not in improvised spaces.

Aurela Kadriu: Is there any other protest in '97 apart from October?

Lindita Cena: There were constant protests. There were constant protests after October.

Aurela Kadriu: Did you participate in those?

Lindita Cena: I didn't miss one protest (laughs) because... I interiorized it and it was impossible not to participate back then, the organizational structures were really strong. There was no need to promote it that much or to call on people to join the protest because every one of us was ready to go.

Aurela Kadriu: Then in the other protests, did you start to work on organizing or you only participated?

Lindita Cena: No, no, I wasn't part of the organizing, but I participated in the protests.

Aurela Kadriu: Did you go as a group from the medicine faculty?

Lindita Cena: Yes, and then, after I started the lectures, I got to meet other colleagues and we went together.

Aurela Kadriu: We're moving on to the protests of '98, respectively in March of '98, I would like to stop there specifically, I assume in that part you were more aware, more engaged. How did it happen, how did the organizing of the March protests come about, respectively the bread protest?

Lindita Cena: Yes, at the beginning of March we know and we all remember the Prekaz massacre¹¹ of the Jashari family. They were stranded, you know, they were under the siege of Serbian forces and could not secure food or basic medicine, for which they were in dire need because they were surrounded by police forces. And then it was the Women's Forum of the Democratic League of Kosovo, which made a call for the mobilization and rallying of as many women and girls as possible, to at least send them some bread and basic medicine to the people that were confined in Prekaz.

The protest was organized on March 16, 1998. We planned to start the march in Dragodan, at the American Embassy [Office]. There were a great number of women and girls, who, each of them held in

¹¹ In March 1998 Serbian troops surrounded the compound of the Jashari family, whose men were among the founders of the Kosovo Liberation Army, and killed all of them, including the women and the children. This event energized the Albanian resistance and marked the beginning of the war.

their hands a loaf of bread and medicine, hoping to get to the families stranded in Prekaz. I'll tell you how everything went.

Aurela Kadriu: Yes.

Lindita Cena: So, at the very beginning of the gathering there were various provocations by different people. But we did not stop the march, so initially, the march started in Dragodan, and at some point, we arrived by Fushë Kosovo, near the Agricultural High School, throughout that part of the march we had people following us with cars that had Serbian plates. They provoked us, shouted at us, they tried to scare us or... but we did not stop, we continued marching, we did not shout back at them because we knew very well why we were going there.

In one moment, I don't remember it myself very well, it was a matter of seconds, and one of them drove the car into the crowd of women protesters. From that point on, I don't know what happened, I lost consciousness, I was one of the women who were hit by the car and I don't know. I don't remember what happened afterward. Next thing I know I was in the hospital, my leg in a plaster cast and there were some people who accompanied me, whom I didn't know, and who didn't know me but...

Aurela Kadriu: Were you at the front of the march, at the back, or in the middle?

Lindita Cena: I was somewhere in the middle of the march, but as the athletic type that I was, I wanted to contribute a little bit more. We had these red bands, those of us who made sure that the mob doesn't go out of line, the line which defined where the protesters should walk. And we had a red band in our arms to be identified, for them to know that this is the line where you should walk and I was somewhere in the middle of the march. I know that we also held each-other's hand so we didn't get separated. There were also people close to me that got hit too, but my case was more severe since I had injuries.

Aurela Kadriu: When you started the protest, at the time there was a shortage of basic food products, where did the idea of taking bread come from and where did you get it at first?

Lindita Cena: We got the bread discreetly because they, actually the protest was announced, they knew that we, they knew why we were going to Prekaz. But we had to wait for it to become dark and we got it at some bakery where we were regulars or someone else provided it, and each of us had the duty {gestures quotation marks} to have a loaf of bread, since it symbolized going to Drenica with bread in our hands. We secured it in whatever way we could, in discretion, without being noticed from...

Aurela Kadriu: You for example, how did you get the bread?

Lindita Cena: I (laughs), I secured it through the owners of the apartment where I lived. So, through them, I asked to borrow bread from them and send it there.

Aurela Kadriu: And when you departed did you really think you would be able to arrive in Prekaz on foot?

Lindita Cena: {nods} We left with the intention to arrive there, even though there's some kilometers in question, but we left with the intention to arrive there and we were aware of how far it was or that there could be obstacles. We knew that the road wouldn't be clear, but our purpose was to finish our mission till the end or to finish what we started. But, unfortunately at that moment, the protest broke up. The people dispersed. And then, there was intervention from the police forces and unfortunately it [protest] didn't go through.

Aurela Kadriu: Were you at the other protests during March? For example, March 8?

Lindita Cena: Yes, it was the protests before these, but I don't remember them anymore, their purposes and everything. But I know that... I don't know if they were before or after this one, the ones we had in downtown Pristina, we had a placard from which we read, they were written by somebody else. But, each protester distributed a placard, where the rights of the Albanian people were demanded, I mean, independence.

Aurela Kadriu: Were there other protests, others that had a different significance?

Lindita Cena: Yes after, after I survived the injury, so it means I wasn't doing really well because it was a sensitive area of my leg, and I want to thank the doctor Agron Pustina, who made it possible, who did the impossible to remain as close to me as possible in those moments. Because it was a matter of whether or not I will become handicapped or be able to walk again like I used to, but it healed completely. But it was my luck and the doctors' help and the others that I am where I am today and I'm able to walk again.

During the time when my leg was in a plaster cast, there was, I'll never forget after this one, there was a protest with keys, to go out in the city with keys, so to jingle the keys and make noise. Unable to go out in the city, I went out on my apartment balcony and {gestures holding the keys} I did my part (laughs). I couldn't stop myself, it was in our blood and we know the purpose and the reason why we're protesting and it was impossible to stop yourself, even if I wanted to stop myself I... it was impossible.

Aurela Kadriu: Okay, if there's something you want to add...

Lindita Cena: Yes I have something else that I remembered while speaking. One week after the accident, the first general elections were held and I... even in the condition, I had the will and I wanted to express my will and vote. With the help of my neighbors where I lived, they made it possible for me to go out and vote, with crutches and plaster cast in my knees, on my feet.

We had it [polling station] in Sunny Hill, and when I went to the polling station there happened to be cameras, a big group of people that were waiting to cast their vote, hundreds and thousands of people. Zekerija Cana¹² happened to be at that polling station and he asked me about my condition. I told him how it happened and he presented the case in front of the camera and he gave a good example. He said, “Even with crutches, and plaster cast in legs, in this situation, she goes out to cast her vote.” It was a call for the people to go out and vote.

Aurela Kadriu: What were these elections about, what year are we talking about?

Lindita Cena: ‘98, March 22, 1998, the first general elections held in the Republic of Kosovo, hindered by the regime, but held by the Albanian people anyway.

Aurela Kadriu: Thanks a lot.

Lindita Cena: Thank you.

¹² Zekerija Cana (1934-2009), historian. Member of the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms, also leader of the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds Campaign.