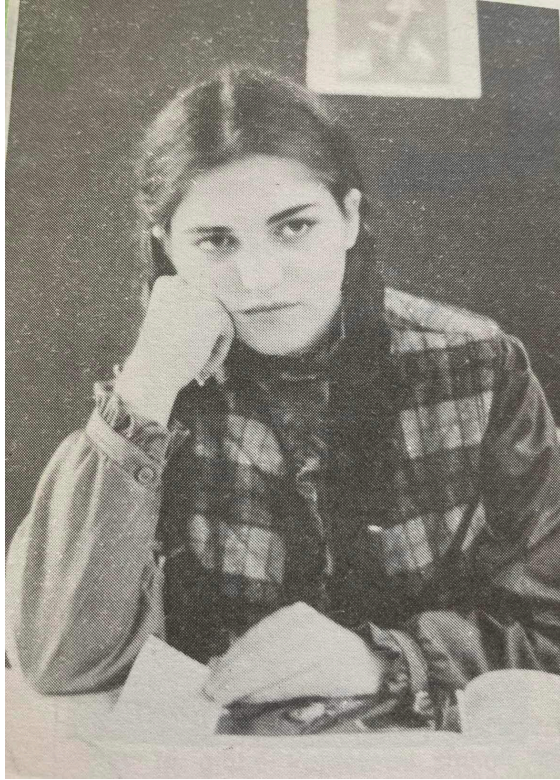


Valentina Saraçini

Journalist and singer



In the photo: Valentina Saraçini

From the personal archive of Valentina Saraçini

Okay, so my name is Valentina Saraçini. I am a journalist and writer by profession, but in my youth, I was also a light music singer with the Radio-Television of Prishtina's production. I was born in Skopje, on September 28, 1962. I completed primary school in Skopje, at the school called *Vllazërimi*. I also finished secondary school, specifically the *Zef Lush Marku* high school, in Skopje and enrolled in the Faculty of Psychology. In 1980, at the *Akordet e Kosovës* festival, I was a debutante and performed a song by Veton Berisha, winning the "Golden Ocarina."

<<<Excerpt from Veton Berisha's song "Mbi Det" (Over the Sea) performed by Valentina Saraçini>>>



Audience First Place at "Golden Ocarina," "Kosovo's Chords," 1987

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And it was a big surprise for the audience, but even more so for me, as I did not expect such great success. After that, the engagements became very frequent, both from the Radio-Television of Prishtina and the Radio-Television of Macedonia in the Albanian-language programs, meaning musical shows, where I was invited very, very often, because suddenly there was a popularity that I did not expect to reach that level.

I was set on pursuing the Faculty of Psychology and continuing to live in Skopje. However, many events occurred that influenced me to change my life plans, even though it is quite natural for a person at the young stage, at the age of 19 to change their path or ambitions. But for me, the political circumstances had a significant impact.

In the meantime, in '81, demonstrations took place in Kosovo, demanding equality for the Albanian people of Kosovo with other peoples and the advancement of Kosovo's governing status, for Kosovo not only to be part of the Federation as an autonomous province with veto rights, but to become a republic, separate from the Republic of Serbia. The demonstrations were very strong at that time. In Macedonia, we, not only as Albanians but as a broader public in former Yugoslavia, were not well-informed about what was happening here, likely due to heavy censorship, because the demonstrations were bloody, but initially, we had no idea what was happening.

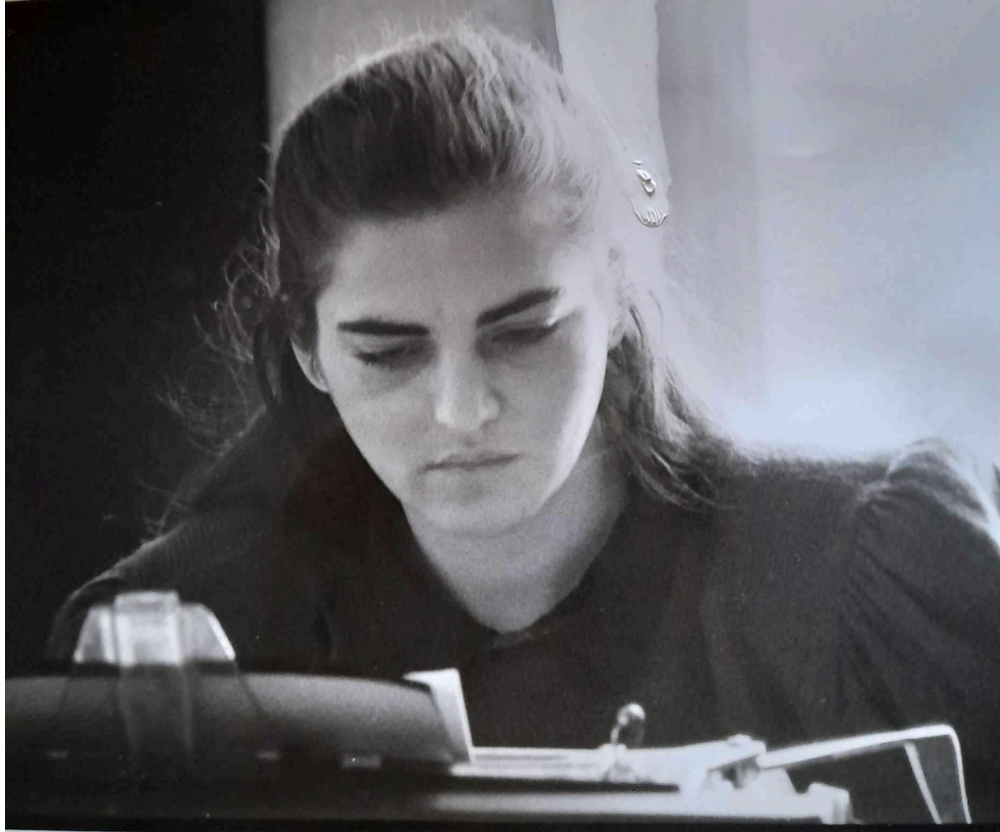
At that time, I was a long-time activist in a youth organization, which was a cultural, international organization that was also present in former Yugoslavia. I was part of the leadership of the Music Youth of Macedonia for years, since gymnasium. When these events occurred in Kosovo, many things immediately began to reflect in the approach and behavior of the authorities towards Albanians. First and foremost, for example, just like in Kosovo after the demonstrations, ideological-political differentiation began, where people were dismissed from their jobs and... there was a campaign by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia to label individuals and groups as hostile, so wherever... whether they were involved in organizing or simply supported the demonstrations. It was a campaign of political differentiation, and it was strongly felt in Macedonia as well.

So, while I was at the university, I felt it through... from some provocations I experienced there from a few individuals, and I left the faculty, saying, "If I can, I'll try to continue it by correspondence because I really enjoyed it." At that time, there was no Faculty of Psychology in Prishtina. It wasn't open, and that remained a regret for me. But since my career had started here, and I knew it would continue, I was then called to work at the Television of Prishtina, and I was employed there. However, it was very interesting that I worked there for about eight months or so, and I noticed I still hadn't received my official appointment. So, I went to the director, Agim Zatriqi, may he rest in peace, and asked, "Why don't I have an appointment?" You know, he offered some justifications, you know,, "This and that" some justifications like, "We'll see next month, there are some formalities," and so on. But he didn't want to tell me the truth to avoid upsetting me, which he later explained to me many years later. Even decades later. It turned out that they had opened a file on me in Macedonia, and I had no idea, and the approval wasn't granted here because. The verifications had gone through, and I was not given the appointment because, let's say, I didn't have a positive recommendation from the structures there in Macedonia, and I was completely unaware of these things.

Meanwhile, a job opening was announced at *Zëri*. I think it was in April of '82, and I said to myself, "I will apply," since journalism was starting to appeal to me a lot. I used to see journalists on television, and I liked their creativity, feeling that... although my popularity as a singer was rising, I thought, "Hold on, because..." you know how young people are

[*laughs*], I thought, “Hold on, I have other qualities I want people to know about.” I was truly an activist, had a lot of knowledge about culture and art, but even from a young age, I had written stories published in the newspapers *Pionieri*, *Gëzimi* in Skopje, and *Flaka e Vëllazërimit* published them. So, I really liked journalism, as well as the dynamics at the television station. But I noticed that everyone, you know, would talk about the prominent names, such as our great writers and poets, all of whom I would see at *Rilindja* when I’d go for an interview. I had been interviewed twice by *Kosovarja* and *Zëri*, featured on the front page, with posters published, and... when I saw the *Rilindja* Palace, I thought... entering the elevator and seeing the figures we had studied, in our literature classes. “I have to come here,” [*whispers*] I said to myself. Then, this job opening came up, and I applied. As I said, one of the reasons was that they still hadn’t given me the appointment. I didn’t feel secure. I had left university, left Skopje. So, I applied and got accepted. It was the best test in the competition. Along with two other colleagues, the three of us were hired, and I started working at *Zëri*.

On the first floor of *Rilindja*, there was a large buffet where you could see all the most famous figures of journalism in Kosovo. Sometimes I even had the chance to sit and listen to the conversations of older colleagues... and it was that feeling of learning, absorbing. But there was also the desire to prove that I, too, would become a good and well-known journalist, and initially, according to the legal rules, we started as interns, then earned the title of junior associate, then senior associate, and eventually, one could become an editor or commentator, depending on the field of specialization. But these were the categorizations.



*In the photo: Valentina Saraçini
From the personal archive of Valentina Saraçini*

<<<Scene from the Prishtina Bazaar>>>

I started with simpler topics. Going to the market to see how food items are. Comparing them with the consumer basket, "Have prices increased or not?" After some time, I would ask, "Is this affecting the standard of living, the family budget?" Some colleagues would then say to me, "Oh, now you're going to the market," because I was very famous as a singer... and to some, this seemed like a downgrade. But not to me, I was determined to start from scratch and learn the craft properly. So, I went to the market and asked, "How much does this cost? How much does that cost?" But slowly, gradually, my ambition was very strong, and my desire was to move to more significant topics, and I was particularly interested in social issues at that time because I felt them personally, and it was also evident that through these social topics, we needed to say, "Why is the social situation in Kosovo so dire?" "Why is there so much poverty?" "Why is the standard of living and unemployment so poor..." which, in essence, are political topics. So, we started tackling these... and I did some topics back then that I am proud of. For example, I once visited Janjevo, a factory that produced... metal goods or something, and I went there and they didn't have... some workers explained how the director had brought in a relative of his, and I made the story about "Violation of rights."

Meaning that others who had the right to employment were not hired, then, there was an illustration made by Salih Hutolli, an artist in our editorial team, he illustrated some... He illustrated it with a fishing hook as if it was taking away workers' rights, depicting the director. That was a very bold topic for that time, and it caused quite a stir. So much so that the director later called the editor-in-chief and said, "She can no longer set foot there," you know, and he replied, "Excuse me? What do you mean she can't?" meaning, "Her entry is banned there." It was very difficult to overcome these obstacles, it required a lot of work.



In the photo, from left to right: Valentina Saraçini, Qani Mehmedi (editor), Gani Dili (chief editor), and Hakif Bajrami (historian), 1985

From the personal archive of Valentina Saraçini

What I remember very well is the feeling of how the editors taught and guided us, as the situations, again I return to this, were very delicate due to that ideological-political differentiation. After '81, it was very difficult... even for experienced journalists, let alone for us who were younger. So, censorship began to be strongly felt at that time. It went as far as, for example, decisions or directives... decisions that were the positions of the Communist Party, whether of the Central Committee of Yugoslavia, Serbia, or the Provincial Committee of Kosovo. To the point where it was stated, "These, these topics must be addressed, these, these..." you know... and it was imposed. Many things were imposed... and then there was also self-censorship. But to practice self-censorship, you needed to have a lot of, let's say... you still had the desire to say something, but you still had to be careful not to cross the line. Even though for us who were younger, it was a

bit easier, because the main burden fell on the editors, as they were the ones who bore the responsibility. The editor and the editor-in-chief bore the responsibility if a text was published that clashed with the political positions propagated by the Communist Party. However, I remember that I was fortunate to have Qani Mehmedi as my editor, who himself was one of the courageous journalists. He used to tell me, "When you young ones reach the point where I have to cut something from your work, then you've become good journalists, because you've written very boldly," or, you know, not just writing for the sake of it... So, that feeling was created... that feeling that... the desire to always say something more than what was allowed. But we were aware that we had to say it in a way that wasn't too open. Openly, it could have consequences, such as being dismissed from the job, or... initially being expelled from the Party, then being dismissed from work.

So, nevertheless, at that time, the general feeling began to emerge, both in *Rilindja* and in other institutions, to resist. That's where the resistance began. It never stopped. The... the demonstrations were indeed violently suppressed, demonstrators were killed, and hundreds of young people, whether organizers or participants in the demonstrations, were imprisoned. But a resistance and an ideal for the Republic of Kosovo, for the independence of Kosovo, never faded. Only the circumstances and the force dictated the methods of carrying out that resistance. I recall that *Rilindja*, but not just *Rilindja*, also the Radio-Television of Prishtina. *Rilindja* was... so to speak, a leader. It... it initiated that resistance, which then culminated in... in the late '80s... specifically in '88, when Serbia started to impose constitutional changes. That's when... that's when the mass resignation from the party membership began, and among the first to do so were the journalists, editors of *Rilindja*... and other employees, who handed over, meaning boycotted, their party cards. We all had a common motivation, to create as many bold topics as possible. As bold as possible... in favor of that ideal, contributing to opposing and resisting the oppressive regime, which was clearly visible... because we were, in a sense, under occupation. And in this ideal, we had very strong collegial and friendly relations.

I mean I remember that all the time, I mean, even during your free time, you would spend it with the people you worked with... and what I miss about that time is precisely this. A sense of collegiality, solidarity, appreciation... of course, there was a bit of jealousy, a bit of rivalry, but not at the level you see today. People knew how to value you, they knew how to give, let's say, compliments. There was a show we did at the Television of Prishtina, and I was invited to debate on the show where I used to work before, *Youth Rhythms*, and we were there, and we had a very bold discussion. We spoke openly about what was wrong, what was not good that was happening, and that the youth and Albanians should be equal. There were also some Serbs who spoke, so it

was an exceptionally bold show... and I remember that, for instance, the next day when I went to *Rilindja*, people came by, various colleagues, from the magazines and from *Rilindja*, they came to *Zëri* to compliment us for... for the courage and for what I said on the show, on Television of Prishtina. I miss this a lot because today, there is a lot of competition, but there is also a lack of professional and collegial ethics, because you see, even interpersonal collegial relationships have a kind of ethics, and I miss that now.

And what's missing, above all, in today's media is that core essence of doing journalism in the interest of citizens, the state, and freedom. Because we still haven't fully achieved it. We haven't completely rounded off our statehood, our sovereignty... and we are still, in a way, engaged in a political struggle. Now it's more of a political struggle, but there are still moments when integrity is threatened, meaning there are attempts from Serbia to threaten even territorial integrity. And now, this struggle of political pluralism, the battle among political parties for power, along with a... how to say, either silent or open party affiliation of most media outlets, fundamentally undermines the interest of citizens, freedom, statehood, and the country's independence. This pains me greatly... and it further strengthens my nostalgia for that sense of idealism and unity we had when that resistance began. When everyone had a single, main goal... everything else was secondary. The primary and main priority was how to do journalism, how to create topics, how to support one another, and how to develop topics as bold as possible to favor the articulation of the people's ideal and aspiration for freedom and independence.