INTERVIEW WITH JANET REINECK

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Duration: 85 minutes

Present:

1. Janet Reineck (Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. Ana Morina (Camera)

Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:
() - emotional communication
{} - the speaker explains something using gestures.

Other transcription conventions:
[ ] - addition to the text to facilitate comprehension
Footnotes are editorial additions to provide information on localities, names or expressions.

Part One

Anita Susuri: Janet, thank you for being here and talking to us. Can you tell us something about yourself? A short biography and then something about your first memories.

Janet Reineck: Thank you for having me do this interview. It's a real honor to be working with you, it's a wonderful project that you have.

I was born in Pacific Palisades, in a part of Los Angeles, in California, near the coast. Lovely little town, which was founded in 1921, by a group of methodist utopianists, from New York, and they found this place, this sweet little place near the ocean and the mountains, sandwiched in, a beautiful little place and they created this town. They settled in tents in 1921 and then grew this very intentional little town and it became this lovely spot, and I was lucky to grow up there. [I] Had a very nice childhood and my parents were just teachers, you know, just middle class people. But it was a lovely place and my friends were very interesting, had interesting parents as well and so it was a very rich childhood.

I danced a lot, I danced from the time I was three years old and that was a big part of my life, and did well in school and then we left. My parents, we left that town, Pacific Palisades, when I was about 18 years old, and by that time I was very much getting interested in the world. I went to a little college to begin with, called Humboldt State, in Northern Californian, and I simply went there because it rained all the time. Northern California, we have, California is a long state and there's all different kinds of climate zones, and this one is very, very rainy and forests, and I went there really because of that.

Which was kind of crazy, but I had some wonderful professors there, especially existential Christianity, sort of, Teilhard de Chardin[1] and, Nietzsche[2], you know, I had philosophy, really good philosophy teachers there and French and…

Anyway, then, that got me to Sweden, so I lived in Sweden for a year when I was about 23, from that college and that was a fabulous experience. I lived, first I went to a school in, north of Stockholm, in a place called Väddö, and that was, it was great living on my own and living in Sweden, studying there.

[1] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) was a French Jesuit, Catholic priest, scientist and paleontologist who wrote several influential theological and philosophical books.
[2] Freidrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was a German scholar, philosopher, and critic of culture.

And then I finished studying and I got a job as a *barnflicka*,[3] like an au pair, like to take care of kids, near Stockholm, and that was incredible.

I had four kids to take care of and I'm speaking Swedish, and, but I made money… I would sneak away during the day to go clean, to be a maid, to be a housekeeper around that area. While the kids were in school I had another little job, and that job I made a little bit of extra money and I was able to go to the Balkans for the first time.

So this is, let's say 1976, and I went with a group of Dutch people whom I had gotten to know, who were folk dancers. By this time I had done all kinds of dance, I had done ballet seriously, and modern dance, and then I got into folk dance and Balkan dancing, I just loved it. So, I went to Transylvania, to Romania, Cluj-Napoca, up in the mountains there in Romania, and learned Romanian dance with this group of Dutch people (laughs), coming from Sweden. I had met these folks and so that was my first time in the Balkans.

And then I went to UCLA, University of California Los Angeles and I studied ethnography, ethnic arts they called it, and got my BA [Bachelor of Arts] at UCLA and realised that I wanted to study in the Balkans. So I started going to the Balkans, traveling in the summer, by myself, as a young woman with a backpack on my back and taking the train around the Balkans, and at that time, this was Eastern Europe and this was an iron curtain, and this was me as an American. Very difficult even to get in and out of countries at that time.

So, then I graduated and got… then I started my master's degree in dance ethnology at UCLA and I had to find a theme for my master's research. So I was still traveling around the Balkans and I've kind of focused on Yugoslavia because it was the easiest place to work at that time. Much easier to be than any, than Bulgaria or Romania, definitely. Couldn't… couldn't even talk about Albania, forget it, that was completely closed. So I just kept going around, looking, you know, going to weddings especially. Where people were gathered and I could see their ritual on display, let's say.

And then in 1980 I was at Zagreb *smotra*,[4] *smotra folklorike* (folkloric), in Zagreb, which was this gathering of all these groups, and I met the Albanians for the first time, and I didn't really know anything about Kosovo, or Albanian dance. I had been doing… I had stayed in Varna, in Bulgaria, again in Romania, I had studied in Sárospatak, in Hungary. I was really serious about learning all these different dance forms.

But, I met these Albanians, they were some young kids from Gërmovë, which is a village near Vitia, and I could see that they were just different than all the other groups in Zagreb. The other ones were all second generation, like they were wearing costumes that the people didn't wear anymore. They were sort of beautiful costumes from whatever, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, other parts of Yugoslavia, fancy,

[3] A Swedish term for a young woman employed as a nanny or babysitter.
[4] A Serbo-Croatian word meaning "review" or "festival," often used for cultural gatherings or folklore events.

beautiful costumes that people didn't wear anymore, and the Albanians were wearing *tirqi*[5] and *plis*,[6] and, clearly this was different, and they had *zuralodra*, and this was really different. And I said, "wow, this is something", I really related to, immediately to the music and the kind of rawness of it, it wasn't fancy, it wasn't created for the stage, like a second generation life of folklore, it was real. I could tell these people, this is what they did, and I stayed with these kids for, you know, I kind of hung out with them and then they said, "well, here's our address, here's our village where we live, Gërmovë", I still have the piece of paper, Gërmovë.

And so somehow… they left, but I somehow made my way down and I was looking for a town called Uroševac, Ferizaj. And I went on the train by myself, I found this place, and somehow I found my way to this village, and the village was in the middle of a wedding. So there were days of this wedding, so I hung out with all the young women, and I didn't speak, of course, a word of Albanian. I spoke a few words of Serbian and nothing else, and I just… there was a lot of dancing and singing and I was hanging out with these girls, and they… actually this is interesting (laughs).

I've never told this story in English, usually I've told people how I discovered Kosovo in Albanian but I've never actually said these words in English, it's interesting (laughs). But I… what was interesting is that when you're in those situations you are never alone. So these girls were by my side all these days, except for a few moments, I'm with these… I mean even when you go brush your teeth at the, you know, spigot, the water in the yard, or you go to the outhouse, you know, there's always someone with you. And that was very unusual, to the Americans that was not something I had experienced because we all, we kind of have our space. These people needed no space, that was a big thing.

But, I was enchanted by everything. This was… now we're at 1980 and we're in a room, not a distant remote village, this is a village near Vitia, so it's not very remote. But it's *shilte* [Alb.: floor cushion], and it's *sofra*,[7] and it's *çaj* [Alb.: tea], *gjygym* [Alb.: metal kettle], and *bukë* [Alb.: bread], *pite*,[8] and *pasul*[9]… so the aroma, the smells I still, I still relay, that's still my favourite food is *pasul* and *lakna*,[10] and you know, real village food, and *çaj*, and *bisedë* [Alb.: conversation] and *muhabet*.[11] You know, and sitting

[5] Traditional Albanian woolen trousers, typically white with black embroidery, worn by men, especially in the highlands.
[6] A traditional white woolen hat worn by Albanian men, symbolizing national identity and heritage, especially in Kosovo and northern Albania.
[7] A traditional low wooden table, often round, used for communal dining in Albanian households, where people sit on cushions or mats around it.
[8] A traditional Balkan pastry made of thin layers of dough filled with ingredients such as cheese, spinach, potatoes, or meat, similar to a burek.
[9] A traditional Balkan bean stew made with white or kidney beans, often cooked with onions, peppers, and sometimes meat.
[10] Albanian term for cabbage. In this case, it refers to a simple traditional dish made by boiling cabbage, often served as a side or used in stews.
[11] A Turkish-derived word used in Albanian to mean casual conversation, friendly chat, or socializing, often implying a warm and engaging discussion.

around *shilte* in a room with an *oxhak.*[12] That was my first experience of Kosovo and that's what brought, that's what got me really was the, sort of physical experience. And then the people, the particular way they were, and particular language, this Albanian, this sound of the language really drew me, and most of all the behaviour toward each other.

So, at that time we were all sitting, all the time, on the ground, on *shilte*, cushions, and when anybody comes in the room, everyone gets up to shake their hand, and not a special guest, just a normal person from a neighboring house or something. And that's a big deal, it's very different, getting up from off the floor and standing all the way up to say hello, and the long greetings everyone had with each other. This I had never seen before.

So all of these factors together made me realise very quickly, this is where I wanted to study because I was really searching for where am I going to live to do my master's research for UCLA. That was sort of the, the goal and I found it, I mean, that was it.

Then I came to Pristina, they said, "well, you, you know, you go to Pristina to take the train back to leave back, to go back to America", and at that point I came to Pristina and people said, "well, you need to go to Shota[13], you need to go to see the ensemble". So I went, they were rehearsing and I danced a little bit with the ensemble, met their artistic director, Xhemali Berisha,[14] and met the dancers there and…

So then they… I left and I went back to America and I worked hard to get a Fulbright, stipend scholarship, Fulbright[15], and I did, I got the Fulbright, and I was awarded in Spring of 1981. So right when the demonstrations were happening. I remember I was just about to get ready to go and my stepfather came to me, he said, "look at the newspaper, 'demonstrations in Pristina'", and I went, "oh my god, you know, what, what now" {holds hands out and looks up}. So I really followed what was going on in 1981 and the, you know, starting from the, the demonstration, emanating from the convict from the dormitory and the young kids and then the workers coming down, what would become my street where I lived, Dubrovniku, you know, and everything going on with the… with the people losing their jobs and all the, then martial law being declared by Serbia.

So, I didn't know what to do, so I came anyway to Yugoslavia and of course, they wouldn't let me into Kosovo, no foreigners, 1981. And so, I'm stuck. I'm in Yugoslavia but can't get to Kosovo, so I found an apartment with an old Montenegrin widow, in Belgrade, Dedinje neighborhood, in Belgrade. And then,

[12] A traditional fireplace or hearth in Albanian homes, often serving as a central gathering place for family and social interactions.

[13] Shota is an Albanian dance originating in northern Albania and Kosovo. The Shota ensemble is a professional ensemble of dancers established in Pristina in 1950 by Kosovo Albanians. It was named 'Shota' after the traditional dance.

[14] Xhemali Berisha is a renowned Albanian choreographer and singer from Kosovo. He served as the artistic director of the Kosovo Folklore Ensemble "Shota," leading performances across Europe, Africa, Asia, and America. In 1988, he relocated to Geneva, Switzerland, where he founded and directed the Ensemble Skaros, promoting Albanian and Kosovar traditional music and dance.

[15] The Fulbright program is a U.S program that provides grants for students.

I had already been learning some Serbian to work because when I knew I would work in Yugoslavia I was learning Serbian at UCLA, so I knew some Serbian.

I met Shkëlzen Maliqi,[16] who was, he had a little Albanian library and so we got to know each other and I started learning Albanian, while I'm living in Dedina, in Belgrade. Meanwhile, I'm traveling through Yugoslavia thinking, "well, I may never get to Kosovo". So, I was getting to know the Vlachs[17] , in east Serbia. This particular culture, very, very, unique culture, there's Vlachs all over, you know, all over Yugoslavia, Greece. But I got to know these Vlachs and it just didn't attract me at all, the culture, it was not what I wanted to do.

Then I went to Montenegro and I was trying to find Albanians in Montenegro, and I did, in Plav, and it also was not a good experience. It was a bad experience, being a woman alone was not good in Montenegro, it was dangerous, and I… so I had difficult experiences in these other places.

And then, suddenly, in the fall of 1981, I got a message from Shefqet Plana,[18] who was a professor here [Kosovo], and he said he would be responsible for me, he would be my mentor. So, you know {clicks fingers}, by the next day I packed up and I was on the train to Kosovo, and I remember arriving.

So, now it's fall of 1981, and I arrived at the old train station in Pristina, and it was cold and foggy, I remember, and I had no idea what to do, you know. So I go up to the faculty, the English department, because I knew I would find some people who spoke English, because nobody spoke English in Kosovo at that time, nobody. Except a few English professors (laughs), and I did, I met Qemajl Murati and Lindita Aliu, and they became my first friends here. And then there were a few… there was an American and a couple of English professors, and they lived up Bregu i Diellit [neighborhood], just at the top of Dubrovniku [street], and they lived on the side street, and they… then I found where to live based on them living there. So that's where I established my base, up in Dubrovniku.

So this is the beginning now, of my life in Kosovo, in 1981, and I'm settling in.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask. What was the first thing that drew you to the Balkans?

Janet Reineck: When I was dancing, as a teenager I was doing modern dance, and whenever the music of Dvořák or Bartók, Romanian dances, I remember would come up, I was so drawn to that. I was so stirred, my emotions were so stirred by that music. Now that's not exactly the Balkans but it was that general area, Eastern Europe, and then I started listening more to Balkan music and started dancing Balkan dance. So it was really that, it was the folklore that drew me.

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[16] Shkëlzen Maliqi (1947) is a Kosovo Albanian philosopher, art critic, and political analyst. He co-founded the Social Democratic Party of Kosovo and has led various civil society organizations. Maliqi has published works on art and politics and currently heads the "Gani Bobi" Institute for Social Studies.

[17] The Vlachs are a Romanian-speaking population living in eastern Serbia.

[18] Shefqet Pllana (1918–1994) was an ethnic Albanian ethnographer and scholar from Kosovo, renowned for his extensive work in Albanian folk music. He authored over 140 articles during his career, contributing significantly to the preservation and study of Albanian cultural heritage.

Then I started learning about all the politics and the, you know, the intrigue of Eastern Europe, obviously, but it was first the music, really, that draw me… drew me there.

Anita Susuri: And you said that you had a group of people from Stockholm that you came…

Janet Reineck: From Holland, yeah, I was living in Stockholm and somehow I met these Dutch people and they were on their way to Transylvania for a two-week dance course in the mountains of Transylvania, and I started doing the men's dancing. Very complicated, really great dancing, and the couple dancing, and I loved it, and I still am close to some of those people that I met in 1976, from Holland. They were passionate folk, folklorists and folk dancers that went to the Balkans all the time.

Anita Susuri: You told me that you decided to study Albanians and you were more drawn to this culture. When you came here, you settled, did you have any problems with, I don't know, police chasing you?

Janet Reineck: Yeah, yeah (laughs), big time. So I'll go now into setting up life in Kosovo, my first years. So I settled in this neighborhood, just off Dubrovniku, and I was with, in a big fancy house, but I was in the basement. And my landlord was actually from Montenegro and the wife was Albanian, and one daughter. And, so I was sort of their surrogate daughter but I lived in the basement there, but my whole… and they were sort of city people, sort of, sophisticated, wealthy people. But my neighbors were all *katunar* [Alb.: villagers], were all villagers from Anamorava and Gollak, and the husbands were coal miners, they all worked in the mines.

So they had rough lives but these were beautiful families and I got… that's who I hung out with really. Every afternoon, when I was in Pristina, everyday having lunch with the villagers, usually, and then having tea in the afternoon. And hanging out in those houses and just, that's where I really started absorbing the life.

So, so, my… so my introduction to Albanian life was really with villagers, in Pristina but *katunar*. You know, and that was, that's why I speak this language, which is really *katunar*. You know, because that's who I was with all the time and I was also getting to know people at Institute *Albanologjik*[19].

So getting to know the language was tricky because, first of all, I spoke some Serbian and so, and everybody here used to speak Serbian, especially in Pristina. And, so it was easier for them to speak Serbian with me than to wait for me to try to get out a few words in Albanian. So it's very, that was one thing that was hard, people would revert to Serbian and so would I… but then it was difficult because you had *dy gjuhë* [Alb.: two languages], you had two languages. You have… and at that time they didn't call it *standard* [language], they called it *letrare* [Alb.: literary]. Literary language and village language they called them, and one was from Tosk and one was from Gheg.[20] So what I was reading,

[19] Instituti Albanologjik (Albanological Institute of Pristina) is an independent public research and scientific institution that deals with the study of the spiritual and material culture of Albanians.

[20] Tosk is the Albanian dialect from the south. Gheg is the Albanian dialect from the north.

everyday I would open *Gjurmime Albanologjike*[21] *me fjalor* [Alb.: with a dictionary], with a dictionary and try to read, and *Rilindja,*[22] the newspaper, and *Kosovarja,*[23] the magazine.

Those were especially things that I was reading with the *fjalor* [Alb.: dictionary]*, shqip-anglisht* [Alb.: Albanian-English], you know, and I'm trying to make this out, then when I'm hearing people speak, was not that language at all. You know, "*Unë do të shkoj, unë kam me shkue.*"[24] I mean, this was… when you're trying to learn a new language, something like Albanian, man, I mean, I knew French and I knew Swedish by that time, but, and Serbian. But, I couldn't figure it out, I couldn't, it was really hard, I had one grammar book, *Gjuha Shqipe* [Alb.: The Albanian Language], from Albania, *prej Tiranës* [Alb.: from Tirana] (smiles).

So I had this grammar book from Tirana, which I would hide, because you weren't allowed to have anything from Albania at the time. You know, I kept it very hidden, but that was my little grammar book for kids, *Gjuha Shqipe*, and then I had, you know, *Gjurmime Albanologjike*, and then I had *katunar*, and it was very difficult. There was a wonderful Englishman called John Hodgson, and he was an English teacher here. Sort of a traditional Englishman, you know, really kind of old style, and he was fascinated, like I was, by Albanian culture, and loved going to the villages, and he was really learning Albanian, he was a real language scholar.

So we went a couple times and he… out to the villages, and he said, "okay, here's the deal," you know, "*Unë do të ha bukë. Unë kam me hangër." Do të ha* [vs.] *kam me hangër,*[25] you know, he kind of, he sort of showed me what was going on with two languages (laughs). So that was that.

At the same time, it was very difficult because wherever I went the police were following me. Anybody that I met or had a relationship with, they [police] were making them go to the SUP,[26] we called it the SUP. You know, *Sekretarijat za Unutrašnje Poslove* (laughs). You know, the police station, and they were always calling me in because at that time they assumed nobody knew any Americans. There were, there was this one English teacher who was here for a while but generally nobody had met any Americans and they assumed we were working for the CIA, you know, I mean it really did.

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[21] A scholarly journal published in Kosovo, dedicated to Albanology—the study of Albanian language, history, culture, and ethnography.

[22] The first Albanian-language daily newspaper in Kosovo, founded in 1945. It played a key role in promoting Albanian culture, literature, and national identity until its closure in 2002.

[23] A women's magazine in Kosovo, first published in 1971. It has covered topics on culture, fashion, literature, and social issues, becoming one of the most influential Albanian-language magazines in the region.

[24] In Albanian, "*Unë do të shkoj*" and "U*në kam me shkue*" both mean "I will go" but belong to different registers. *"Unë do të shkoj"* is the standard literary form, while *"Unë kam me shkue"* is a colloquial construction used in some dialects, particularly in northern Albania and Kosovo.

[25] In Albanian, "*Unë do të ha bukë*" and "*Unë kam me hangër*" both mean "I will eat [food]."

[26] SUP (Sekretarijat za Unutrašnje Poslove). The Secretariat of Internal Affairs in Yugoslavia, responsible for internal security, law enforcement, and administrative matters such as issuing personal documents. Each republic and province had its own SUP.

So, when… when I started to be able to go to villages I had to register with the local police as soon as I arrived in the village. Give them my passport, register and they would know who I was staying with and then they were following me, you know. So that time in the 1980s was so, on the one hand, you know, people, the oppression, you could feel it, it was so bad and so hard, and there was a lot of fear, and also a lot of shortages. I remember, "where are we going to get milk? There's no milk, let's send the kids to wait in line for milk, for bread", you know, that was…

But I was thoroughly enjoying living here and started to go to the villages. I wanted to go to Opoja[27] and Has[28] because they're more remote and the traditions there are so rich. But I wasn't allowed to because it was on the Albanian border, I couldn't go there. Also there was a law that any foreigner working in Yugoslavia, if they went to outside the city they had to be accompanied by a Yugoslav in their field.

So I had to be accompanied by an ethnologist and that was very difficult because I couldn't really go with a man. I can't travel with a man alone and go and show up in a village, that was not going to happen, that was not acceptable because I wouldn't be accepted as the kind of woman that they would open up to (laughs). And then the woman couldn't go because they had to be home at three o'clock to make dinner. So it was difficult to go to the field because of lots of reasons but I, but I started to.

So that was my life, it was dancing in Shota, so I became, sort of a member of Shota. Everyday I would go to the rehearsals there and then in the afternoons, you know, I would be with my neighbors and learn about Albanian culture, learn the language, and that's how I slowly got my life here. So I was here for two years at that time.

Then I went home and I actually taught in Hawaii, I was teaching at the university in Honolulu. I got a job there for a while and then I went, I got into Berkeley, so University of California at Berkeley, very well known university, and got into their anthropology department. Really based on my work in Kosovo, I mean by that time now I had my master's from UCLA in dance ethnology actually, the master's program and had a master's and wrote it on, actually, dance in Kosovo ritual, wedding rituals and what it all means, all the symbology of ritual in Kosovo.

So, with that experience, there was a professor at Berkeley who worked in Yugoslavia and really was fascinated by Kosovo and wasn't able, didn't work here but was fascinated by it. So he really wanted me to be one of his students at Berkeley, Jean Hamill, was his name, a fantastic professor, so he was my mentor. Before that, my mentor at UCLA was Elsie Dunnan, who was actually Croatian, and her work was with the Roma in Macedonia and Kosovo, and on the Adriatic coast in Dubrovnik. So she was ethnic Croatian and she was my mentor, so she also brought me, you know, was interested in me working in Yugoslavia.

[27] A region in the south of Kosovo.
[28] A region in the southwest of Kosovo.

But when I… going back a little bit, when I decided to work in Kosovo, my professors were saying, "no, you can't work in Kosovo because it's too dangerous for a woman to go alone, and nobody knows Kosovo, and nobody knows the language, forget it", and I said, "well, that's where I want to go". So I just, even though they said you can't go there, I did anyway. There was no support to go to Kosovo at the time because it was, they thought it was too dangerous, because they had heard about Kosovo, and it's Muslim, and nobody knows about it and, you know, that was the attitude about Kosovo at the time.

So then I started my courses at Berkeley and it was fascinating to me because I was learning anthropology, theory basically. And, I was in a cohort of twelve students, who were… who all were in love with a place. You know, one of my colleagues was working in Nepal, and one in Egypt, and one in northern… in Rajasthan, northern India, on legal anthropology. So everybody had their specialties, someone with Native Americans, and so we all had our passion for some place, but I had spent, by that time, the most time in the field. Others had not really been there yet and I had been there.

So everything we were reading: Lévi-Strauss, and Radcliffe Brown, and Malinowski, and Margaret Mead, and Clifford Geertz, and all the, you know, all this theory. I was hungry for it because it gave me the tools to understand what I had experienced.

So, for example, kinship theory, which is how different societies in the world understand the people in their family and what they call them. For example, in America a cousin is a cousin, *kusheri* [Alb.: cousin], and this is *djali i axhës* [Alb.: my paternal uncle's son], *djali i dajës* [Alb.: my maternal uncle's son], but we call them the same name, why? Because we have the same relationship with them, you {points to the interviewer} have a very different relationship with your *axha* [Alb.: paternal uncle] and your *daja* Alb.: maternal uncle], especially when people lived in extended families, and you saw… going to *daja*, mother's brother, was just, you had a completely different experience than you did with *axha*, who was an authority, who lived in your house and he was, you didn't…

You know there was a very strict order in the family in the old days, and your father, if your father wasn't there, he was *gurbet*[29], your *axha* was in charge of you and that relationship was very formal. *Daja*, for fun, you went to *daja* to play around, fool around, you know. So, *djali i dajës* or *çika e hallës* [Alb.: paternal aunt's daughter], *çika e tezës* [Alb.: maternal aunt's daughter], very different relationships. So that is what we call kinship structure. For example, in America, we share it with the traditional Hawaiian society, they, they had a similar kind of structure we did, whereas you, you share it with some other cultures.

Part Two

[29] A term of Turkish origin used in Albanian to describe migration, particularly labor migration, often implying nostalgia and hardship experienced by those working abroad.

Janet Reineck: I was fascinated with what I was learning at the time because it was shedding light on all of these experiences I had had in Kosovo and I could really make sense of them, in comparison to the rest of the world. So this was, you know, everything I was just, *kam thithë* [Alb.: I absorbed], it was every book that we read, every paper I had to write, I really was fascinated {clenches fists} because I had two, by that time, two years of living in Kosovo.

So then it was time to do my dissertation, I went back to Kosovo, I got another Fulbright and an Irex grant for eastern Europe, and I, that was 1986. I came back, I lived here for two years and by, at that time I got a car and it was a car that had gone through all the Fulbright scholars who had lived in Yugoslavia, and I was the last one to own it {raises finger}, and it was an orange K14. This car that looked like a cartoon of a car, just a square box car, and then I could really go.

So then, no one was so much tracking me as much in the late 80s. So I was then, you know, I was Has and Opoja, and going around in Gollak, and I could really go, and I was the first woman in Opoja they had ever seen driving a car. And I was trekking women around, you know, those that would be walking, we'd pick them and go around.

So that whole period of fieldwork was incredible. So I really did stay a lot in Opoja, in the village of Bellobran. Again, I've never told this story in English, so I'm, you know (laughs)… this is so interesting to hear it for me. And then Has, of course, was absolutely fascinating, difficult, girls in 1986, 87, 88 were still getting engaged by *msit*,[30] matchmaker, when they were 14, 15 years old. {Nodding} You know, so that's not that long ago and that was a completely different life, and all of the men were, *bukëpjekës* [Alb.: baker], were bread makers, so they were all gone.

So it was a very strange life there, usually every family had maybe one man around, but generally it was a women dominated, women were running the households there. It was very difficult, no water, no wood for fires, I mean, really minimal existence, and whatever their husbands could make as bakers. Which was also a very difficult life, wherever they were baking, because they were baking all night, and then would try to, they never incorporated into the local cultures because they were bakers.

So that was fascinating, and then Opoja. Very interesting area, very conservative, where the women, in some places, some villages the women didn't even do farm work because they never left the walls, *muret* [Alb.: the walls]. You know, *kurrë s'kanë kalu* [Alb.: they have never crossed], you know *gardhet* [Alb.: the fences], *muret e shpisë* [Alb.: the walls of the house], you know, they were so conservative, but very rich then in culture, and so did a lot of studying there.

My dissertation, my doctoral thesis was about migration, *gurbet*. That's why I really studied these bread makers and then in Opoja they were… their tradition of *gurbet* had really started in the early 1900s, especially in Gora, which is beyond Opoja, on the way to Macedonia. Those people had been going as migrants to Balkans, like to Turkey, to Bulgaria, to Macedonia, and that's where they got this

[30] A traditional matchmaker in Albanian culture who facilitates arranged marriages by negotiating between families to find a suitable spouse. The practice was more common in the past but still exists in some communities.

zanat [Alb.: craft] of, of *ambëltore* [Alb.: sweet shop], sweet shops. They really gained those skills in [*inaudible*] certain places, and that's why then, when they, they then started migrating into Yugoslavia and they…

Anytime I wanted to meet an Albanian, wherever I was in Yugoslavia, just go to an ice cream store, they were all Albanian, and filigree, and *bukëpjekës*. So if you want… I could go anywhere I was, I could say, you know, I'd just go in and they were Albanians.

So anyway, studying migration in Opoja was fascinating. So they had real, I mean they had been, had an early tradition of migration, earlier than other places, but also in the 70s of course, when all of Yugoslavia was going out, when Germany was asking for workers and they all went. And then in the 80s so much migration.

But my thesis was about the fact that these migrants at that time, just the men, all the women stayed behind, and I… what my thesis was, what my theory was that because the men lived alone and they lived, you know, they hardly incorporated into the local societies because they lived to make money to send home and that's all. So they lived on beans and bread, and they lived six men in a, in a room. You know, so that everything could go home, and they went home once a year.

Even, I know migrants who were in Belgrade, from Opoja, and they still only came home once a year, maybe twice, from Belgrade. So it was very rarely home for 25 years, for 30 years, they were not home, and their heart was left in Opoja. Their, their identity, as men, their spirit, and who they were as human beings, it was related to their identity as Opoja men. Not in Lens, or in Vienna, or in Geneva, or in Berlin, or Munich. That was just where they, even though if it was 25-30 years, that's just where they had their bodies, and they made money, and they lived, and they sacrificed everything.

Most of them didn't make money, some of them went to America and became wealthy. I mean a few people gained wealth but most of them were just supporting their families, and the point is, when they came home they wanted to see life in the village {pointing} as it had always been. In fact the wife of migrants, the family of migrants lived a more conservative life because they had to maintain this high moral standard, so when the husband came home they had never been seen outside the walls of the house, or whatever. It was more strict and more conservative for the men who… the families of the men who were abroad.

They were living in extended families, so say you had a few men living home, but it was that, his wife had a tougher life than anybody, and when he came home and had gifts for the family, and money, he had to distribute it equally. So, his wife, the wife of these migrants, really suffered the most, that was my experience, and that's what I was studying.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask you, to talk to us about all the *traditat* [Alb.: customs]that you learned about and what did you think about them? How did you accept all these, was it weird for you? (laughs)

Janet Reineck: People always ask me that when I do these TV things, and no, what's weird is that it wasn't weird at all. You know, so, so these… I really always loved being in the village the most. I don't know what it is, in my mind and soul that is attracted to life in Albanian villages and attracted to villagers, the old men, the old women, you know that I would hang out with.

And the food… I mean, my grandmother was a peasant in America, she's from Nebraska, and my mother was really a peasant at heart, even though she eventually grew up in Los Angeles. But, I have that blood, something about, something about rural culture I have in my blood and it's what attracted me.

So, it's very, it's a very nuanced and it's very complicated because for example, there would be friends visiting and they would see women just standing there like this {puts hands together and straightens back}. The men are all having conversation in *oda*[31] and *muhabet* and the women are just serving tea and then just standing there {does same pose}, not engaging in the conversation. And, you know, people come from the outside and look at that and go, "oh my god! You know, the way these women are treated".

On the other hand, for the most part, I felt, all my years, and this including now the 1990s, that women here were much happier than women in America because they were never alone. They always had a group of women, there was never a question of feeling bad or depressed, that hardly existed.

When I, up in my neighborhood in Bregu i Diellit, when I would be homesick, for example, and sort of depressed, you know, they would like… it didn't even register for them, like, how could you care that much about yourself to be depressed. It didn't, it didn't exist for them, they lived, they had grown up since they were kids, that you wake up in the morning and your first thought is what's going on with the whole family, and what am I doing, what's my role, and what work do I need to do, or who.

You know, it was a collective brain, mindset, just collective, and there was not much sense of who. You don't wake up in the morning and go, "well, how do I feel and what do I need and what am I going to do today?" Didn't exist.

So that, so my experience, and obviously this is very layered and nuanced, and there are all kinds of people with all kinds of experiences, both in Kosovo and in America, for example. But in general women were definitely happier [in Kosovo] because they weren't dependent on their marriage for their happiness.

So they had a whole different concept of "what is marriage?" In the west, in the western society, let's say, the idea, it's a romantic idea, you fall in love and you're going to have this wonderful life together, but after five, or ten, or twenty, or thirty years, that love diminishes and maybe you live for your kids, but there's no idea that you have to be with that person for life. You come, the idea of, "what is a marriage?" is completely different.

[31] A traditional Albanian guest room, primarily used as a men's gathering space for socializing, storytelling, and discussing community matters. It played a significant role in Albanian social life, especially in rural areas.

So especially these arranged marriages, I found them to be the happiest because you grow up with the idea you're going to have, you work very hard to show how industrious you are, what a good worker you are by doing your *çejz*,[32] and that's all you do. I mean, most of these women that I knew in the 80s, who were mothers, grandmothers, they had never been to school, they were just doing *çejz*, highschool. They spent four years, five years just doing *çejz*, you know, these beautiful, you know, this beautiful handwork, was to show how industrious, and if they were that busy all the time, then they weren't getting into mischief.

You know, so this, you had to… you sculpted your reputation, from the time you were a kid, you got the idea, you're going to have this marriage made and the more you can present as a moral and hard worker, you know a moral female, the better marriage you're going to get. So all of these factors work together, this is what I wrote my dissertation about, was women's roles and how they looked at them, how they felt about them. The *botëkuptim* [Alb.: worldview] is really what I was writing about, worldview.

So, back to these, the happiness factor. If the main… the most important thing for a woman that determined her happiness, whether she was happy or not, was her *vjehrra* [Alb.: mother in law], not her husband but her mother-in-law. Because the mother-in-law kind of ran the household and if she was very nice and treated all the *nuse* [Alb.: brides], all the brides, equally it could be a very good life.

You know, you worked very hard and often in the dark and in night, and in winter, and it's cold and you're, the men are all sitting around talking, and the women are, you know, still working at night and cleaning up and doing dishes, and out in a house outside and it's cold and dark, and, you know, all these. We could go on and on about the suffering of women, but at the same time you're never alone doing this, you always have other women with you.

And, another factor is that American women, I'll take that example, you have to deliver on so many levels. You have to be beautiful and continue to be beautiful as you get older, and a wonderful wife, and a housekeeper, and working, and a professional, and really good at your career, and a wonderful wife, and raising your kids. All of these things you have to be good at. Whereas in the old Kosovo, in traditional life, you had to be a good mother, you had to have a bunch of kids, including some sons, and you had to be moral and clean, and keep a very nice perfect house, and that's it. And that was achievable. Most women could do that and for that they were respected by the family.

In America you couldn't achieve, you still can't, achieve everything you're supposed to do, it's impossible. It's impossible to be a successful career woman, and a successful mother, and deliver in all other respects, it's impossible. So what you're trying to achieve, it's very, so that's a very different life. Also, it's you often end up alone in America, you may get divorced or in some way end up alone, and who is going to take care of you? Maybe you have one kid or two kids and they're gone, or you know, it's very difficult.

[32] A traditional dowry in Albanian culture, consisting of household items, clothing, and valuables that a bride brings to her new home upon marriage. It is often prepared over many years by the bride's family.

Whereas in traditional Kosovo life, you're social security was not something you worried about because you have *nuse,* because you're going to have sons, you have to have at least several sons because one is going to go on *gurbet*, and one might die. I mean if you had six kids there was so much, such high infant mortality, you had to have a lot of kids to have several sons survive. And why do you need that? Because the *nuse*, the brides, are the ones going to take care of you when you're old, because your daughters are gone. They're living with their husbands and they're taking care of their *vjehrra*.

So that has all changed now but that… so in terms of how did I think about these lives? It's again, it's a complicated thing because in some ways they were much happier, the women, you know, they worked really hard and then they have breakfast and they sit around and have tea, and they hung out, and you know, and then they got together and made *drek* [lunch], you know. But my personal experience is the women I knew were much happier than the women I knew in America, who often were depressed for various reasons. So anyway, that's kind of a long conversation and could go deeper.

But, yeah, I think the traditional family was very limited, you didn't have any chance to express your personality much, or what you wanted in life, but that wasn't what it was about. It was living in a collective of twenty, or thirty, or fourty, or fifty, or sixty people. A completely different kind of life, and it was where you fit into that life and what kind of marriage made {air quotes} for you, and you just wanted your husband to be of a good {air quotes} family, and someone who was honest, and responsible. But your relationship didn't matter that much because mostly you were with women all the time.

Anita Susuri: So you said that in 1986 you were traveling all around Kosovo. Did you stay in Pristina?

Janet Reineck: Yes, my base was… then in '86, I moved into the houses with the villagers. So I was still up in Bregu i Diellit, same neighborhood, but now living in the, well, Feride and Feriz, my mother Feride and my father Feriz, so I was like one of the members of the family. And she was my mother Feride, she prayed five times a day and it was a typical, really typical, completely typical, Albanian village family, living in the city.

Who, you know, with a husband, retired by then, miner, coal miner, and then the sons got married and so then I was living in a house with two *nuse,* and then kids, and then it grew and grew. But that was my rock, I mean that family and the neighbors around them. It was a fantastic life, I loved it, I was… and the younger people kind of, were sort of mystified by what I was doing in the villages.

So I would come back with videos from Has, for example, the woman wearing *drasa*,[33] you know, and this costume, and this *kulla* [Alb.: tower], you know, and this old way of living, and they were sort of offended by it. Because young people in Pristina may have had villager parents or grandparents but

[33] A traditional Albanian garment, typically a long, simple woolen dress worn by women, especially in rural areas. It was commonly used for everyday wear and sometimes adorned with embroidery or decorative elements.

they were, they didn't want that identity, they wanted to be identified as city people. So my relationship to these villages, I was so into that life was kind of a bit of a conflict, contrast, you know.

Anita Susuri: This is what I wanted to ask, the differences you saw in the villages and in the city. Everybody in the city was trying to be more European.

Janet Reineck: Yeah, well yes, and but I thought it was very difficult for professional women in Pristina because they (pauses and laughs)… it was the most difficult life because in some ways you had your freedom and that was great but like the women I knew at *Institute Albanologjik*, or the faculty, you know, the professor women, they still had to be home, cooking dinner, have a beautiful dinner, guests are coming after dinner every afternoon.

So, at that time, lunch was at three o'clock, *drek*, and then after there were all, that's what you did in the afternoon, you went, it wasn't cafe society, it was you went to each other's houses. So, you had to [inaudible] perfect house, this clean… you know, I would say to my American friends, "you look at a stove in Kosovo and it looks like they just bought it and it's twenty years old". And one of the sisters that I lived with in that family, Sadiku, Sadete said to me one day, she said, "you know, you can clean your house everyday and then one day you don't, and the guests come", and you never, that your reputation is tarnished forever. You never, you hear about it from then on, and *"rrethi* [Alb.: circle]*, rrethi",* that your social circle, is what's controlling your behavior because everybody's talking about everything.

So that was especially hard in Pristina, you know, everything… That's a lot of work for a woman when you're working at a job and your house has to be perfect, and you have all this. The hospitality, which Albanians are so proud of, "*mikpritjen*", it's beautiful and I of course loved it, but on the other hand that *mikpritjen* [Alb.: hospitality] made life very difficult for professional women because they had to, their whole life, they had to be always ready for guests, and that's difficult, you know, when you're a professional woman.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask also about the weddings and other festivities in the city. What was the difference in the period?

Janet Reineck: I didn't go to many city weddings (laughs), as a matter of fact, I mean I remember, I think just one hotel wedding actually in Vitia, in the '90s. I didn't, I was, weddings I was always in villages, really. Well there were some in my neighborhood but they were always getting village women, and so it was still a village wedding really.

But, at that time, it was separated, the main thing was men were over there {hands to her right}, women were in a different house, so it was very separate activities. But the best thing was, about being a woman anthropologist, I don't understand how men can be anthropologists and really completely understand a society, because women can go to both sides. I could be really just be a woman and hang out with the women, and sleep with the women, and talk about every intimate thing about life and

love and *msit* and, you know, meeting somebody secretly before you get married, all these secrets and everything. I, because I'm a woman, I could, I always was hearing all of this, what they really felt like.

But, I also was wearing pants and sitting cross-legged, *këmbëkryq* [Alb.: cross-legged], in *shilte*, like a man, and I could do *muhabet*, like a man. That kind of, there was a very different kind of linguistic style of women and men. Women didn't talk about history, women talked about, you know, food, and *turshi* [Alb.: pickled vegetables], and guests, and gossip, and things, and men were talking about, you know, political things. They're really very separate kinds of conversation, but I could, I could hang with the men and really talk to them too. So this is an extreme advantage for being a woman anthropologist, is that you can go to both sides.

So in a wedding, well (smiles), you know, I wrote a book about the weddings. I mean it's, there's a lot to it, but of course I love the dancing and being a dancer, and in Opoja they have *kellçoja*, which is a sequence of eleven dances in a row that the men do. Which was, and still is, incredible, very serious, very, not fun dancing but more like really serious historic, epic dancing, and I loved that.

That's what I wrote my master's about and, and learned it and do it with, I still do it with the men, in their wedding, you know, I'm the only woman who does *kellçoja*, I think. And it's a complicated dance, all… each dance in, eleven dances takes about 25 minutes or 30 minutes to do, and each one is a different rhythm. So it's *zurna*[34] *lodra* [type of drum], but first it's *rubato*,[35] which is no rhythm, they're just following the dancers, and then it's 12/8, and then 7/8, and again, 12/8, 3/4, 7, 9/8, and this is incredibly beautiful and interesting.

And then the women have this fabulous song, especially in Opoja, they have two voice singing. They're like this singing in two levels next to each other {one hand flat on top of the other}, and they're not aware of it, the women, they just do it. And beautiful songs about *gurbet*, that are just, I call it "*gurbet* blues", you know, it's like, it's the tragic, you know, you're leaving and you'll never see your parents again, and you're going to be hungry on the road, and you know, all of these tragic songs of *gurbet*.

Anyway, beautiful, all of that was beautiful culture, and then you know, when I was first here the weddings took several days in Opoja, and so many rituals. I mean, you know, *gëzimi i dhëndrrit*,[36] and getting up at, you know, four in the morning the next day, *për petullat* [Alb.: for the fritters], and you know, all, many, many, many customs to do with *gjerdek*,[37] you know, when the man comes into the

[34] The *zurna* is a woodwind instrument similar to an oboe, known for its loud and piercing sound.
[35] *Rubato* is an Italian musical term meaning "stolen time." It refers to a flexible tempo in music, where the performer slightly speeds up or slows down certain passages for expressive effect, without altering the overall pace of the piece. It is commonly used in classical and jazz music to add emotional depth.
[36] Gëzimi i dhëndrrit (*The groom's joy*) is a traditional Albanian pre-wedding celebration held in honor of the groom. Typically taking place the night before the wedding, it brings together the groom's family and friends for music, dancing, and feasting. This event serves as a send-off for the groom before he joins his bride's family, marking an important step in the wedding festivities.
[37] First night of marriage.

room and the woman has never seen the man before. I mean, I have videos of brides, I'm sitting on the bed, one bride in particular in Opoja, who I know now but at that time we never spoke because brides don't speak.

So I was… that wedding was like a week long and I filmed every part of it and I never spoke to her because brides don't speak. So I saw her a couple years ago, I just saw her recently and like talking like crazy (laughs), because she had seen my film of her wedding, of course.

But I'm sitting with, I sat with her on her bed, in the *gjerdek*, we call the bridal chamber, and here comes the groom she's going to live with for the rest of her life, she has never seen before, and he walks in the door. You know and I'm just filming her, waiting for this to happen, and you know, every part of it was so dramatic and existential and, you know, just unbelievable… Yeah (laughs).

Anita Susuri: Did it take a long time for you to learn all the dances?

Janet Reineck: Well I learned them in Shota, actually, because during the breaks Xhemali taught me the, the *kellçoja* dances and I… and then the others ones are all very simple, I learned them quickly. But *kellçoja* takes a lot to learn, I've now taught in other places. But, yeah, I mean, Albanian dancing, if you're a dancer, it's pretty easy to do {hand dancing}.

You know, and the Has dance, you know, in 12/8 time, "raka tatatata raka tata" {sounding the rhythm}, that's a 12/8. "Rumpapa pakataka rumpatata rumpa pakataka da" {sounding the rhythm}, that's the Has rhythm that the women, the women kind of have this epic style and they're not aware of it, they just do what they do {hand dancing} to that rhythm. Nobody's aware it's a 12/8 but that rhythm has pretty much disappeared, except in Has and Opoja now. But it's a beautiful rhythm to dance to and you can really feel this kind of epic feeling.

I think the other thing that has always attracted me and is one of my connections to Kosovo is this ancientness. I mean that you, when you go up beyond Opoja, Gora and you come to where Macedonia and Albania and Kosovo meet, up there {points up}. I mean, Alexander the Great, that's where he traveled, you know, I mean this connection to epic history. Long, ancient history, and the fact that I could still feel it when I was at those weddings and sitting with those men talking about hundreds of years ago. You know, and that they were still connected to it, to me, is, is, is, is, is a great wealth, it's a great treasure that, that Albanians have this ancient history.

Part Three

Janet Reineck: So, in the early 80s I was doing the research for my master's thesis, for UCLA. Late 80s it was for my dissertation research for Berkeley. Then I went home and I wrote my dissertation and I got my doctorate, and I had my son, all at the same time. So, single mother, but had my son, I was writing, finishing my dissertation with my son sitting on my lap, I mean (laughs).

So then, I was, you know, raised my son, was working full time from two weeks after he was born, working in America, and then things started falling apart in Yugoslavia. So the early 1990s, Yugoslavia is falling apart, one by one the republics are seceding, and we are watching what's going on, especially in Bosnia, and the massacres, and the camps. It was, it was so tragic and horrific.

So then I, actually, was living in… I was doing work, research with Albanians in the Bronx [New York] because I couldn't go to Kosovo. So I, we were living in New Jersey and working in the Bronx with Albanians. *Illyria* is the, was the newspaper, Albanian newspaper in the Bronx. There was a huge Albanian community there.

So, I organized a conference in New York, at Columbia University, on Kosovo, for, with all the many Kosovar who had left or were in America at the time. Anyway, so I was keeping, really, very much still researching Kosovo and very involved in Kosovo in the early 90s but never thinking I could go, go back, because of, Yugoslavia was on fire, Yugoslavia was torn up and it was all war.

Then one day, in 1994, Oxfam called me, Oxfam being a humanitarian aid organization from England. And they called me and they said {holds phone hand gesture to ear}, "we heard about you, would you like to go back to Kosovo and try to run a humanitarian aid project", and I said, "Now!?". This is '94, it's parallel society, I mean I knew everything going on in Kosovo, and I said, and they [Oxfam] said, "yeah, go do a study, go do an assessment, see if it's possible". I said, "well yeah, I'm there".

So I took my son, four years old, and we went down to the Yugoslav Embassy in Washington DC. Drove down there, and they're like, "why do you want to go to Kosovo?", I said, "oh we just love, we're just tourists, you know, just want to go", and somehow they gave me a Visa. I have no idea, I brought my son with me, "well, I'm just a mother and we just have friends and we want to go visit" (laughs). Speaking Serbian at the Yugoslav Embassy, and I got a Visa, somehow.

Come back here [Kosovo] and the situation… I still was living… no, then we got a place in Taslixhe. But I was first doing an assessment, and so, the Serbs were running everything, it was apartheid, it was parallel society, it was incredibly difficult, everything obviously.

So, I had to report to the Minister of Health, Serbian Ministry of Health was going to give me permission to be here, and they said, "okay, you are going to work on sanitation and water problems in the county of Viti". Didn't even know where, you know, which is ironic because actually the first time I was ever in Kosovo was in the county of Viti, but I hadn't been there since.

So, I was like, "okay". So I go out there and do some preliminary investigation, what could possibly be done here? Yes, we have these problems with water, bad water in the schools. So, my job, my mandate, "*mandat*", was to fix water and sanitation in grammar schools, in Viti, that's all, and if I did that then I could stay in Kosovo.

So I go and do some research, and yes, it seems like definitely there is what to do and it's possible. So, then I go back to America, I report to Oxfam, and they say, "well, okay, let's do it, let's go forward with a project". Oxfam wanted to be, a lot of organizations wanted to be a presence in Kosovo, they wanted to monitor what was going on, and one way to do that was to do an aid project. Because they wanted the international community to be on the ground in Kosovo, so that Albanians were not alone with the Serbs, basically. I mean that's the way I think of it.

So, I got the job to go work in Kosovo, in Viti. So then I had, I hired Jamal Morati, was my, my right-hand person. I hired an engineer, a local engineer, Feriz, and we set to work figuring out what to do. So, eventually we worked in thirty villages in Viti, and then at the end, also in Gjilan. And, we worked in the schools at the beginning, and we would go and build a new well, or, or build an outhouse, build a… and I know the Serbian, *Dvokomorna septička jama*, two chamber septic pit.

So it was these septic pit ideas to clean up all the filth at the grammar schools. It was really a horrible situation, and many of people's outhouses, WC, were outside and they dumped onto the village stream, which was completely horrific. So, this is what we were trying to fix, it's the only way we could be in Kosovo, was to do the job we were allowed to do.

But then, after getting used to the place, and doing these projects, we started fixing the schools. Maybe in Gërmovë, that first village, the roof was falling down on the heads of the kids. I mean you could see the sky through the roof, everything was really bad in these schools, I mean really bad. So, we started fixing the schools, but they… I had no mandate to do this, legally we had no permission to do this. We had no building permits, we had nothing, we just did it, it was all illegal, actually, but we said, "I'm American, we're gonna, we're just going to do this".

We didn't have money for the projects, I had money to live here and a vehicle, and a few staff people, but the money for the projects, I had to raise from the villagers. So we would go around, you know, *"A keni naj* [Alb.: do you have] one deutsche mark. Can you give one deutsche mark? Can you give five deutsch marks?" I lot of people had *gurbet*, you know, and they, we'd go to them, "can you? {beggar hands}.

So, this was difficult, this was villagers doing the work, so this is not Oxfam coming in, this is just me from Oxfam, but the villagers had to raise the money and do the work, and this is a time when no one wanted to do anything, this is no civil society. I mean they had their Mother Teresa clinics and a parallel society, parallel school and all of that, but people weren't very inspired to fix anything, right, because they didn't know what was happening to them. They, they were hoping for independence, and at that time I didn't see it coming, I said, "you know, you better just get going and fix your villages because you don't know when or if you're ever going to be independent". I,I,I didn't see it coming.

So… you know, the situation in Kosovo was horrible, impossible and many of the people we were working with were out of a job because they were kicked out of their job, so they had nothing to live on. So a lot of poverty in these villages, and we were trying to get help for them, I mean we would bring

donations of shoes and clothes from England, at that time, because there was such poverty in the villages.

So, the thing that we experienced though, was this solidarity. My job was really to go to each village and make meetings in the mosque or in *oda*, and talk to the women together, talk to the men, and say, "let's fix your village, let's do this, let's fix this school, or let's fix the sanitation, or let's clean this up". When their minds weren't there at all, you know, but the situation was filthy, was terrible, "let's do this!" {clenches fist}, and my job was to inspire them to do this, and to get them all wanting to do it.

But there were many, this was, Viti has a mixed Albanian, Serbian neighborhoods, villages. So that made it very difficult, you had schools that were Serbian/Albanian, so the Albanians in the morning, Serbs in the afternoon, or *kundrazi* [Alb.: the other way around], or they divided the building. So, if we wanted to build a septic pit, which is a big, big job, who's going to dig? Who's going to lay the concrete? The Serbs? The Albanians? Two, two directors, so one school would have two directors, Serbian, Albanian, who had never spoken in four years. If you can believe that.

In a village there's one water source, one, you know, spigot, and here's an Albanian woman, here's a Serbian woman, just coming to get water and not speaking. And they're, of course, they had spoken for hundreds of years, and now no, and so, it was incredibly difficult situation. But there, we, there became this kind of solidarity that we started experiencing and people got this *frymë* [Alb.: spirit], like, "yes, we can do this", and here, "oh, we fixed this school, let's do another school".

Then we realized that high school girls were not going to high school. Girls of that age in Viti, many families had stopped their girls from going to high school, and this is a complicated thing, you could write a book about this. It was very interesting what was going on, because they would say to us, "well, it's because the Serbs are on the buses and we're worried about our girls because of the Serbs", but when you dig deeper it wasn't that. Essentially what it was is there was no work because all the Albanians had been put out of jobs, it was very hard to get a job.

Girls who… girls who were going to be 'working women' {air quotes), village or city, 'working women' {air quotes}, if a family would say, "okay, we're going to have a *nuse* who is {air quotes} *intelektuale* [Alb.: intellectual]." Meaning she had been to school and she was going to be working, that's a very different kind of *nuse* than a *nuse* who is *shtëpiake* [Alb.: homemaker], who has not been to school and is just going to be home. Those are very different kind of women, very different kind of families who have, or you know, who bring in these women.

You might have a mix in a family but it was… so these are very different lives. If a woman is going to go and be a working woman, a 'modern Albanian' {air quotes} woman, at the time, it's okay if she's been to high school, she's been seeing boys who aren't related to her *në bankë të klasës* [Alb.: in her class desk], in her classroom, and that's okay, she's going to be working and that's her life, she's a different kind of woman. But if she's going to be *shtëpiake*, she's going to be a 'traditional Albanian' woman {air

quotes}, she can't have been at high school with boys. Because then her reputation isn't perfect, or might not be.

So, that was sort of what was really inside of all this. Was, "we don't, if our women are not going to have jobs because there are no jobs now, they can't be, they can't have gone to high school". But they would give all kinds of excuses, you know, "we don't have the money to send them on the bus", or, "we can't afford a *burek*, they have to be at school eating", and we would say, "well, how much do you spend on cigarettes a month?" We would total it, you know, how many deutsche marks, at that time, on cigarettes? "Well, it's ten marks a month", or whatever, five marks, "that's exactly what she needs, you can't tell me you don't have the money". And then some of them would say, "if Ibrahim Rugova", because everyone believed in him and anything he said, "if he tells us to send, if he tells me to send my daughter to school, I will do it".

So, I would go, because I knew Ibrahim Rugova from my days at Institute Albanologjik, "*O Ibrahim, i kemi do burra në Viti, në mal, që s'po dojnë me i çu çikat në shkollë. A munesh me shkru një letër?* [Alb.: O Ibrahim, we have some men in Viti, in the mountains, who don't want to send their daughters to school. Can you write a letter?]*." Edhe e ka shkru, edhe e kemi pasë letrën prej Ibrahim Rugova. "Qe." Jemi kthy, do të thotë kemi hecë nëpër krejt malet* [Alb.: And he wrote it, and we had the letter from Ibrahim Rugova. "Here." We returned, meaning we walked through all the mountains]. You know, we're walking through the neighborhoods in the snow, you know, going house to house. We knew which houses were not sending their girls to school, and, "okay, well we can't because her father is in Geneva and there's no one who can give her permission".

So, I go to Geneva and I, you know, I go to Zurich and I'm talking to the men there and I'm saying, "what is the deal?", and I always was saying, "*Ju po doni me u konë pjesë të Evropës, e po leni gratë në Arabi. Çka jeni t'u bo? Qysh me hecë përpara? Qysh me hecë një Kosovë me Evropë, moderne, një vend i ri, në Kosovë kur e keni një shtresë* [Alb.: You want to be part of Europe, but you're leaving women in Arabia. What are you doing? How can you move forward? How can Kosovo move forward with Europe, modern, a new country, when you have a layer…] you know, a whole generation of women who have not been to school. What are you thinking?!". So, that was what I was doing (laughs).

So, we did all these projects that, you know, *Ministria e Shëndetësisë as s'e ka ditë, s'ka lanë…* [Alb.: The Ministry of Health didn't even know, it didn't allow…] absolutely. Then I was teaching English to some village kids, so we did all kinds of projects in Viti that had nothing to do with sanitation, and most of all, we started a women's group. *Legjendë*, they named themselves *Legjendë,* the legend, and it was a group of mostly women in their early twenties, some women in their thirties, forties, but mostly sort of 18, 19, 20, 21.

And what was amazing was that in every village we always found about two women, young women, who were just kind of like {clicking fingers}, "yeah, there's something besides *çejz*". I wanted, they, they just got it, when we came and talked to the women, they kind of were like, "yeah, I want to help you, I

want to do something". Always two, it was so amazing, they just had that little spark of, you know what, there's something beyond çejz, and living, and this life that is predetermined.

So, they became *Legjendë*, two women, three women maybe, from every village, and then we started *edukimin shëndetësor* [Alb.: health education]. So, we would get, organize these meetings every two weeks for the women to come out of their house, usually to the school, to the grammar school, or to maybe a mosque, but we would have these lessons on why breastfeeding is important, because at that time many women were not breastfeeding because it was considered 'modern' {air quotes}, or they thought they should use, you know, formula. Which was, and so there was a huge epidemic of diarrhoea of kids, because they were using bad water in formula. And so things like that, or secondhand smoke and how it affects kids, if kids are sitting in an *oda* with, you know, ten men smoking, what is that like for babies? Just basic things, high heart, high blood pressure and things like that.

So, but the most important thing was getting women out of their houses, together, to meet in a place. So, this is what the *'aktiviste'* {air quotes}, we call them, these women in *Legjendë,* they were called *aktiviste,* activists, and their job was to go talk to every house in their village, talk to every group of women and get them to come to the meetings, which was very difficult. For many women they just had never gone out, except for *dasëm* [Alb.: wedding], *ose* [Alb.: or], you know a funeral, or something where they had to leave the house.

So these meetings were incredible, and the women who were in *Legjendë*, their lives changed forever, and they are now lawyers and professors and they, all of their lives changed. They all went, and in the war they were refugees, they went in Viti, they went over the border to, you know, to Skopje, over that mountain there. But it, it stuck you know, that… after the war they still had *Legjendë.*

So, our life then, at that time, my son and I were living with a family when we were in Vitia. We were, we had a place in Taslixhe, but when we were in the field we lived with a family, the Tafa family, in Terpez, the village of Terpez, near Kllokot, everybody knows Kllokot, *Banja e Kllokotit* [Alb.: Kllokot Spa], right next to that is Terpez, so Kllokot was a Serbian village, Terpez, Albanian, mostly Albanian village. And we lived with this family that had 21 people in it. So, it was still an extended family, some of the brothers were in Germany, but some were home, and there were 13 kids in this house. One house, not like fancy big house, just one house, each family had one little room, and there was a room that we could stay in. And it was fabulous, and it was a beautiful family, and that was like our family, and my kid got to be, hung out with 13 kids and just run all over the place, and you know, make mischief everywhere.

And so, that was an extraordinary experience, being with that family, and the old man, the father, *zoti i shpisë* [Alb.: head of the house], Elmi, god rest him, god rest his soul, and *lokja*,[38] you know, the mother, they were alive and they were from a different generation. So, I had long talks with Elmi, who was real,

[38] A term of endearment in Albanian used to refer to one's mother or an elderly woman, often expressing respect and affection.

real, real *shqiptar* [Alb.: Albanian], you know, I mean he told me stories of having hiked through Albania as a young man, you know, World War 2, and you know, and the way his mind worked was… the, the logic that his mind followed, and I found this in many older people in Albania. Their logic works differently, it was very hard for me to follow where he was taking me when he was talking.

Anyway, so those were extraordinary experiences, and a lot about *gurbet,* again, because some of the brothers were away and one of the wives was still there with her husband away, and that was very difficult because the other women had their husband's home and the difference that that made.

And so, so anyway, that was my experience in the 1990s. The women in that family had never gone to the school, the grammar school, they each had four, five or six kids and they had never been to the school where their kids were, and they lived, you could see it from their house and they had never been out to there.

So… anyway that, the experience of the 1990s was extraordinary because we were able to get Albanians together for a common cause. There was no political parties deciding what way you thought about things, everybody was together making things happen.

And then the end of the story is, I was going, you know, we were really doing amazing projects and I had, by that time a truck, and I had all these Albanian girls playing deaf and we would, you know, drive through these villages, and there's the Serbian police watching us all the time {pointing}. And I'm sure they thought that my meetings in the villages, my meetings with men especially, were raising money for arms, for the KLA[39], I'm sure they thought. So, we were talking about septic pits and school roofs and things, but they didn't know what I was, they watched, they were watching me do all this.

And then one time in 1997, all our programs were going great and we had brought experts from abroad. I had a woman who was an engineer, an environmental engineer, who had come to work with me on the projects. It was great, I mean we were really, like many projects in the 90s, you know, it was real civil society, it was fantastic what we were able to do in three years. And then I went to get my passport, my Visa renewed at the soup, in Pristina, the police, and they just stamped "denied" on my passport, denied. And that meant I had to leave, so, and I had to leave quickly.

So, all our lives, I thought my son would go to high school here, I mean, we were here to stay, and we had to leave, and all the foreigners. There were a lot of foreigners then because all the aid groups were here, there were 17 international NGOs working here and they all had to leave. Basically one by one the Serbians expelled us all, and I tried to stay, we tried to do a switch of a Serbian in American who was trying to get back, or something. We tried in Belgrade, I tried again in Zurich, I tried again in New York, and I was not able ever to come back.

So, then I gave up, and then, and then because of my aid work in Viti, I really learned how to do humanitarian aid, which was not my profession, I was an anthropologist. But… and the people I was working with from other aid agencies [inaudible], Red Cross, they didn't know Kosovo, they knew

[39] An ethnic Albanian separatist militia that sought the separation of Kosovo from Serbia.

humanitarian aid. They had done, they had lived in Africa, they had done many other projects, but they didn't know Kosovo, and I knew this place. And I, and when a villager told me, "well my daughter can't go to school because of the Serbs", I knew it wasn't true and that I couldn't, you know, because I could speak the language and they couldn't… I knew what was going on. And that was an incredible advantage.

But then I really learned that my heart was in humanitarian aid. So I had spent, you know, a decade in anthropology but from then on, from that experience in Kosovo in the 1990s, I never was an academician again. I really, my heart was, from then on, in humanitarian aid and it has been ever since.

So, I went back to America and worked for different aid groups. And now, after starting my own NGO in California and developing it and working in Rwanda and Ukraine for now eleven years, and I'm still working in Rwanda because I can really make something happen without living there. I have a team in Rwanda and we do holistic aid of every kind with the 28 communities there. But, you know, that, to me, is what life is about, is helping communities that are struggling to survive.

I don't need to do that in Kosovo, now, you know, Kosovo women's network, everybody's got in going on in Kosovo. They know how to solve problems in Kosovo. So, now my work is very different here, my aid work is in Rwanda and Ukraine, but I am back to live in Kosovo and I've settled back here, hopefully, for the rest of my life, just because I love it here. There's many things I don't love about it but pretty much I'm able to navigate my life so that I am with the people, and the projects, and the work, and the places that I really love. What I don't love is the jealousy and competitiveness of people, especially women, well and men (laughs), especially… well in any part, any part of this society.

In anthropology there's a term called the 'limited good', and that means a society where we feel that there's a, there's a *numër i kufizuar* [Alb.: limited number]. There's a limited amount of water, let's say you're in the Middle East, there's a limited amount of water, or a limited amount of land, or a limited amount of resources, or honor, or reputation, or wealth, and if you have it {points out}, I don't have it {points in}, and that puts us in competition. So, in Kosovo it's jobs, it's jobs with good wages, it's reputations, and I understand why people are in competition but it's so interesting, I feel that people don't share information because they want to hold on to things that they have written, or discovered, or ideas that they have. They're not sharing ideas, they're not coming together to solve problems.

I think, I mean I only know small parts of Kosovo, but one part is the women's network, Kosovo Women's Network, *Rrjeti i grave*. They are able, they know, they are the best, I mean they know exactly how to solve problems and how to get women together to solve their problems, wherever they are in Kosovo. But my experience, generally, is that people feel they're in competition, and women are gossiping a lot, and talking behind each other's backs, and critical, very critical of each other. Which is a horrible thing to see, you know. So, I pretty much (laughs), stay with the people who are not like that.

And then I started World Dance for Humanity here, which is an organization I started in 2010, in California, and I teach dance. I'm 70 years old now but in California I was teaching six days a week,

here I teach three days a week, and we brought women together for these dance classes, just for fun. But it's also a space where women are not competitive, and not critical, and nobody cares what you look like, or who you are, or if you *katunar* or *qytetar* [Alb.: from the city], or if you have a fancy job, nobody cares, nobody knows, and nobody cares. And we all just come together to do dances from Kosovo, and Albania, and Greece, and Georgia, and Hawaii, and everywhere, and just have a good time. And the money that they pay, the little bit of money for the classes, goes to humanitarian aid. So, we've helped in Rwanda, since September we started, we've helped in Rwanda and Ukraine, and Kosovo, a family that has no money in Fushë Kosovë, and now with the fires in California which have burned down my town, where I come from.

So, it's an extraordinary thing that these, I didn't know if it would work, this concept of World Dance for Humanity, and it absolutely has worked, and the women love it, and I love it, and everyone has made new friends. And it's this non-competitive, non-judgemental human experience that we've created together.

Anita Susuri: Janet, thank you so much for your time.

Janet Reineck: How long was that? (Laughs).