

Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL MCCLELLAN

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Duration: 89 minutes

Present:

1. Michael McClellan (Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. Anna Di Lellio (Interviewer)
4. 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: Can you tell us when you were born, where, something about your first family, mother, father?

Michael McClellan: Ok, I was born in 1956. So an old guy (laughs), and I was born in Kentucky, my family emigrated to the US from Scotland back in the 1850s, and that was kind of an interesting story but because my Scottish ancestor was a stonemason, he came to Kentucky because they quarried a lot of limestone there that was used for building construction, and that's where he went to get a job and my family's been there ever since. So, we've, you know, have been in Kentucky for 175 years more or less now, and that's home.

So, when I retired from the foreign service, first thing I did was to move back to Kentucky, you know, you've always got to go back home, and I live on a small farm there now. It's a quarter of a mile up the road from the farm where I grew up. So, when I was little my parents moved out of the city, to the farm, and I essentially grew up on a farm, grew up in the country, and that did a lot to shape my development, my growth because, I, very early developed a love for nature, for the environment, for agriculture, for the farm life and a respect for farmers and people who work the land, and that's carried with me all through my subsequent career. Because, even as a diplomat I was interested in trying to work on agricultural issues and working with people in the countryside, and this sort of thing.

So, I was the youngest of four children, I was, like I said, born in 1956. There were three boys in my family and one girl but I was always closest to my sister because we had, we shared common interests of music and art, and we were both more home bodies. Whereas my two brothers were always out in the fields driving tractors and working with cattle and horses and whatnot, and I enjoyed that too but, you know, my sister, she's seven years older, she was really a big sister, and, you know, she always had somebody to do something with but since there was not another girl in the family, and, you know, I was young enough, like, not to be in her way and not to be a problem for her.

So, I had a very happy childhood... went to college at the University of Louisville, which is a major urban university in Kentucky. I studied political science, with a heavy emphasis on Russian studies, and also journalism, and it was interesting during that time that I got interested, actually, in Yugoslavia, and because, back then, this was during the Cold War I was a student in university in the 1970s, and for some reason I just got very interested in Yugoslavia.

So, I developed this idea that I wanted to be a photojournalist, hopefully work for *National Geographic*,

that's where everybody wants to work if they're a photographer, and I wanted to, kind of have a professional focus on Yugoslavia. So it was always my dream to go to Yugoslavia and visit all the different areas, and get to know the different cultures, and learn the different languages, and you know, I just thought it was a fascinating country.

So, I went to Syracuse¹ for my master's degree and that was in photojournalism, and Syracuse is one of the best universities in the world for studying photojournalism. It's probably, I mean it's definitely in the top two or three schools globally, for that, and I studied photojournalism, and international relations, but by the time I finished my master's degree I knew I did not want to do photography for a living, and so I went to get a doctorate. You know, it's like when you're going through college, if you don't know what you want to be when you grow up, you keep getting another degree to give yourself more time to think (laughs)... and that's kind of what I was doing because at every stage I completely changed my career goals and had something else (smiles).

So, but while I was at Syracuse, one of my housemates was a CIA brat, we called him. Both of his parents worked for the CIA, and he grew up in embassies and living abroad, and he was always telling us about growing up in Africa and Europe, and all these other different countries because his family moved around a lot... and because of him I developed an interest in the foreign service, you know, that's the American diplomatic core, and... so because of him I took the foreign service exam. Which is, at that time only given once a year but it's a very, very difficult test, only about two percent of the people who take it pass and... but I took it and I failed it the first time, but I failed it by one point, and where I failed it was in English, my English. I didn't pass the English test, even though I was a journalism major, which was kind of embarrassing (smiles), but I passed everything else pretty well and so I thought, you know, maybe this could be a career.

So, I resigned myself to study and prepare for it [foreign service exam] the next time, and I was determined to take the test again and to pass it. So, I went for my doctor's degree, I went to Indiana University, and at Indiana I was studying all international communications, international politics, Soviet studies, things like that, and I took the foreign service exam, again, and I passed it the second time. Now, the process to get into the foreign service takes about two to three years, normally, once you pass the test because you have to go through all these investigations and clearances, and, and oral interviews, and medical exams, and all this stuff.

So, by the time I finished my coursework I was accepted into the foreign service. Now what happened though, was that when they gave me... I passed the oral interviews, for my doctorate, I mean I passed the oral exam, and you know, you have to write a dissertation and you have to do oral exams. So, I passed the orals and then I was ready to do my dissertation, but I was accepted into the foreign service right at that moment and I had to decide, okay, do I take this job as a diplomat? Which could last me the rest of my life, or do I turn it down and do my dissertation and maybe get a job teaching some day (smiles)?

So that was a pretty easy decision to make, I went for the diplomatic service, and I tried to finish my dissertation but I never could, just because of the countries where I was working, and this was pre internet. You know we didn't have "Google" and all these things to do research on the internet. So, I

¹ A university in New York state.

did not finish my doctor's degree but I had a very nice career in the foreign service.

So, I was in the foreign service for 30 years and during that time I worked in, starting from the beginning, North Yemen, this was before the country was unified, then Egypt, where I was the Director of the American Cultural Center, and that was an amazing experience (smiles), I really loved Egypt. But, by the way, I kind of fell in love with the Middle East and the Muslim world at that point and so I, I, kept coming back to it, you know, through the course of my career.

After Egypt, I went to Russia and this was just after Russia... right after communism had fallen. So Yeltsin² was the President, it was all, you know, post-communist, but the country was trying to figure out where it was going, democracy was just starting, fascinating time to be there, and I was there for three years. Then, from Russia I went to... well back to the States [USA] for a short time, but then I came to Kosovo, back in '96, just for a very short time, I was only supposed to come for a couple of weeks and open up the US office.

Now at this time, and this is an interesting story about why the US office was opened at that time. We had closed our big cultural center, in Belgrade, on Čika Ljubina street, or neighborhood. Whatever that was, but that was a big cultural center because it was the cultural center for Yugoslavia, and we had other ones around the country but with the break up of Yugoslavia, and the United States shifting its priorities away from cultural centers, you know, as a foreign policy objective {waving hands}.

Suddenly we had this huge cultural center for a very small country {hands together signifying small} and we just closed it, and Milosevic³ got, actually, very upset about that. Apparently, he as a younger man he had used the cultural center a lot in his own studies and in his own experience in college and so forth, and he did not want us to close that center.

So, Milosevic approached our Secretary of State and asked us to reopen the cultural center in Belgrade... and at that time we wanted to open up an office in Kosovo because things were just starting to develop, started to get heated up a little bit, and so the secretary of state at that time, who was Warren Christopher, said, "okay let's make a deal, we'll reopen a center in Belgrade but you have to let us open up in Kosovo", and so he [Milosevic] said "fine, okay, no problem", (laughs). "But it's got to be a cultural information office, no consulate, no political officers, nothing like that". So, you know, he just wanted it to be a soft kind of programme, you know, nothing, he didn't want any military or political people, or anything like that there.

So, I was given two weeks notice to go to Kosovo and open up this office and it was really kind of funny because I was, I was working in Washington at the time. At the headquarters of the US information agency, and I was called into the director's office and he said, "we want to send you to Kosovo", and I literally said, "where's that?", and because honestly I'd never heard of it (smiles), and he said, "well it's in Serbia", and I said, "oh okay, I know Serbia", and he showed me on a map. It was this little diamond shaped corner down at the bottom {draws with finger in the air}, and I said, "oh, that sounds interesting". He said, "we need you to go there and open up an office, we'll, you know, send you there, we'll have someone from Belgrade to help you out, we'll get you a car, you know, blah, blah, blah, and,

² Boris Yeltsin, former president of Russia from 1991 to 1999.

³ Slobodan Milosevic was President of Serbia from 1989 to 1997.

but, we need to have it open in about two weeks (laughs)". Okay, so, get on a plane, I go to... to Vienna and in Vienna at the US embassy they had a car for me.

So, they gave me this car and I drove from Vienna down to Belgrade and I picked up a local employee at the embassy in Belgrade, he was the only Albanian in the embassy in Belgrade, the only Albanian speaker. Now, he had grown up in Belgrade, he had always gone to schools in Belgrade. So Serbian was really his first language, almost, but they always spoke Albanian at home, but he was not educated in Albanian. Okay, but he spoke it quite well, certainly well enough, and so he came with me to be my interpreter and assistant, so we drove down from Belgrade to Pristina.

We, our first stop, of course, was to go visit Dr. Rugova⁴ at the little LDK ⁵headquarters {points}, over here by the stadium, and we met his assistant, chief of staff, I'm not sure what his title was at the time, but [Mr. Adnan Merovci](#)⁶ and Adnan was basically assigned to me to get everything we needed.

So, he had several houses already lined up that would be possible centres for us. We went and looked at them, we chose the one in Dragodan⁷ {points}, and at the time it was occupied. You know the family was still living there, but they moved out in about three days, the house was then empty, and we were able to bring in computers and stuff from Belgrade, from the embassy. We went to local furniture stores and got all of the furniture we needed, and in two weeks we opened the American center in Dragodan, the US Information Office.

And, the ambassador came down, the assistant secretary of state for Europe had flown, flew in for it, had all these high level officials, and at the opening of the... US Information Office we had, of course, Dr. Rugova, all these officials from the LDK, high level people. We also had the Serbian officials, they sent, I think, one guy, he was like the... I don't know, the director, the boss, the representative, whatever he was called. You know, his office was at the Grand Hotel (smiles) and he very reluctantly, you know, came to join our event, you know, because for protocol reasons they kind of had to and I think Belgrade told him, "go there, do what you have to do and then leave".

So, we had this grand opening, approximately, best we could figure, about 5000 people turned up for the opening. It was, I mean, you're too young to remember this but all of Dragodan was just covered with people, the streets, the alleys, all the houses around the center, the balconies were crowded. I mean everybody just opened their doors and let friends, family, strangers, whoever come in and watch, you know, watch what was happening from their balconies. Yards were full of people, I mean, you couldn't move in Dragodan, hardly, but Dr. Rugova and the assistant secretary, for Europe, from Washington, together raised the American flag over Dragodan and that was the first time, I think a foreign flag flew in Kosovo, and it was a huge event.

I mean it was hugely emotional for, you know, most of the people there, certainly for Dr. Rugova and them, and, but we had to be very, very careful to keep it at cultural programming, okay. But what then

⁴ Dr. Ibrahim Rugova founded the Democratic League of Kosovo and became President of Kosovo from 2002 until his death in 2006.

⁵ The Democratic League of Kosovo is a political party founded by Ibrahim Rugova.

⁶ Adnan Merovci was a close associate of Ibrahim Rugova.

⁷ Neighborhood in Pristina, now known as Arberi.

started happening is that every western embassy in Belgrade, the Germans, the, the Swiss, the Norwegians, the British, everybody who was concerned about Kosovo, which was basically all of them started to come down to visit Kosovo on a regular basis because now all the diplomats in Belgrade had a place where they could stop.

You know, they could always start with our office, they could come, they could talk to a foreign official, they could do it in English, obviously, and they could kind of get a feel for whatever was needed, we could give them tips about where to stay, who to talk to, we could make appointments for them, introduce them to whoever they needed to meet. And, so it was a huge help to the entire diplomatic community to be able to come down to Kosovo and have their port of call, so to speak, you know, a place where they could check in.

We would always go through the restaurant that was almost next door {points}, I can't remember the name of it now but it was a really good restaurant and that became the hangout for diplomats. It helped everyone to be able to report better about what was going on in Kosovo, and so they [diplomats] would usually start with us [American office] and then they would go see Dr. Rugova, then they would go visit other political factions.

Once we started started talking closely with the Islamic community and with Bishop Artemia, of the Orthodox Church, they started meeting with them too [other diplomats], we would just make phone calls for them and set them up and we could help them find interpreters if they needed them, and so forth. Because, of course, none of the diplomats in Belgrade spoke Albanian, some of them did speak Serbian and, of course, at that time any Albanian political leader was happy to meet with foreigners and speak Serbian, that's what it took to communicate.

But in time they started getting freelance interpreters down here that they could call and, you know, just have them for a day, or two days to help with meetings and whatever. And, so the center [American office] made a huge difference in how the west, how the outside world, viewed Kosovo. Of course, under Dr. Rugova and the LDK it was very, very important to keep peace in Kosovo.

You have to remember that this is while Bosnia was raging. Certainly Bosnia was starting to settle down a little bit but we had seen the violence in Bosnia and everyone knew that if that same kind of stuff started happening in Kosovo it would be a disaster. So, it was vital to keep the peace, you know, by whatever means were necessary but then once western diplomats began to visit and began to understand what was going on here, then the... then Europe and North America could make a more concerted response to events in Kosovo. To support, you know, human rights here, to support greater autonomy because at that time nobody supported independence because the break up of Yugoslavia, we had already seen what would happen when the country broke up and we were afraid that if Kosovo broke off it would be the same thing over again.

Now, obviously that changed once the war started, you know, once the violence started in Kosovo and you got into the war with the ethnic cleansing and you know, the refugee camps in Macedonia, at that point all bets were off and everybody supported independence. So the situation completely changed at that point, but also because, you know, we had this presence here. Once, after my time actually, like

after 1997, you got into the Kosovo diplomatic observer mission, KDOM ⁸it was called, and, again, our office was the focal point of that because once we had a presence in Kosovo it was a lot easier to expand that presence than to come in and start a presence from zero, you know what I mean.

So, setting up that cultural office in the very beginning was a toe hold, if you will, that it enabled the United States to do a lot more in Kosovo, to have a much bigger presence, and our political staff in Belgrade were coming down like literally every, every two weeks. They were just constantly coming down, the political officer at that time was a gentleman named Nick Hill, and if his last name rings a bell with you, he's the brother of Chris Hill, Ambassador Chris Hill⁹ ... and Nick was, he was the political officer, he was extremely interested in Kosovo and what was happening here, and his mandate, really, was to follow the events that were going on here.

So, he started coming down every couple of weeks, he would stay at the center [American office], we would do meetings with Dr. Rugova and all of the various political factions. We would meet with the Serbs, the Serb leadership, we would visit religious leaders, NGOs. I mean Adem Demaçi¹⁰, for example, we would, invariably, go to his NGO and talk to him because at that time so many of the political leaders had NGOs. That was, that was kind of their base for operation, it gave them a way to function and to have a presence, you know, have an office so to speak, and, you know, we gave grants to a lot of these organisations and so did the Europeans.

Europeans were much better about it than us, to be honest, but they would make the rounds at these different NGOs, and talk to the women's groups, the union groups, you know, the Serbs and the Albanians, meet with the, the, Roma, the gypsies, meet with the Bosniacs. We even went out to [Janjevo](#) and talked to the Croats, you know, at some point. So, it was very important to try to follow the events with as many viewpoints as possible and to get an understanding of things from as many perspectives as possible, so that we could really start to see the picture of, you know, of Kosovo.

You know, think of Kosovo as a mosaic, if you only look at three or four of the little stones that make up a big mosaic you have no idea what the picture is. You may understand what that little stone is, what that one little square of color, you know, maybe represents but you don't see the whole picture. But once you start getting a lot of the pieces and you start getting them into the picture then the image starts to form and then you can really see the whole picture and understand what's happening, and it was also vital for all of these people to get out of Pristina.

So, they would make trips to Peć, Peja, they would go to Prizren, they would go to, you know, Kosovo Polje, Fushë Kosova. You know to see the monuments, understand the, the mythologies, the

⁸ KDOM - a mission to observe and report on the general freedom of movement and security conditions throughout Kosovo.

⁹ Current US Ambassador to Serbia.

¹⁰ Kosovo Albanian human rights activist.

perspectives of different things. You know, look at the Turkish monuments from the Ottoman¹¹ period. Again, to just get the historical perspective from all different viewpoints, and this could not have happened without a, without some kind of diplomatic presence in Kosovo from somebody. Now, we happened to be the first, and to be honest I doubt Milosevic would have let anyone else in, but we had something he wanted and he was ready to make a deal with us, but I think if he had understood how the office [American] could possibly influence events with the entire diplomatic community he might not have done it.

Part Two

Michael McClellan: I was here [Kosovo] from June '96 until sometime in '97. It worked out to be about a year, a little over a year, like 15 months. So, anything that happened after '97, I was not here during that time and I followed it in the news but I wasn't here to experience it. But then I came back again in 2000. Oh, that's what I forgot to tell you.

I went to Russia and then I went to, to Washington and they sent me out to Kosovo, and I thought I was only going to be here for two weeks but I really liked it and I kind of fell in love with the place (smiles). So, thankfully when we opened up the office the people from Washington were really impressed with the office that we got set up in 2 weeks (smiles) and they were really impressed with the event and the media coverage and how we did it.

So... they [Washington office] asked me if I'd be willing to stay and run the office for the first year, and I said, "I mean, why not?" You know, it would be interesting, it's kind of boring to work in Washington, you know, so I said, "I'd be happy to, but... Can you give me something in return?", and they said, "well, what would you like?", and I said, "I'd like to go to Hamburg, and I'd like to work in Hamburg, Germany, you know, for my next assignment", and so they promised me that if I stayed in Kosovo for a year they would send me to Hamburg, and I could learn German and everything. So, we made that deal and sure enough at the end of the year I transferred to Germany, after studying German in Washington, and I spent the next two years in Hamburg.

Now, during that time, that's when everything began to fall apart [in Kosovo], and I watched, you know, the fighting escalate, on TV. I was watching CNN¹² everyday in my office, seeing what was happening and then when the NATO bombing campaign started, I said, "I've got to go back to Kosovo". And so I curtailed my assignment, I cut it short and I came back in 2000, in the year 2000.

Now, at that point it was over with but it had just ended, so, you know, the place was a disaster, ruins were everywhere. I drove up from Macedonia and I remember seeing dead animals beside the road, like cows and things. You know, driving, everywhere you drove, you know like coming from Skopje to Pristina, all the buildings, not all, but a lot of buildings were bombed, they were destroyed. You could

¹¹ The Ottoman Empire was an imperial realm that controlled much of Southeast Europe, West Asia, and North Africa from the 14th century to 1922.

¹² CNN (Cable News Network) is a multinational news organization.

just see disaster everywhere.

So, I came back [Kosovo] in 2000, the, what was then the US office had expanded, kind of all over Dragodan, it had moved up to the top of the hill {hand gesture up}, because my office was destroyed {hand gesture down} on the first night of the bombing campaign. A Serb tank, Serb army tank pulled up in front of my office, the soldier, the barrel cranked around {motions with hand} to, to aim at the front door (smiles). A soldier popped out of the tank and told our Albanian guard, “you need to go home” (smiles), and he took down the American flag, folded it up and left the building. He was the only one there, everybody else had been evacuated at that point, and as I understand it, they then took a land mine and set it inside the door {gestures picking up and placing down} and blew the building up {opens hand miming a blast}.

Now the building was later repaired and I think some NGO works in it now, I’m not sure, at least they, they were back then, but they destroyed the building. So, after the bombing and the UN took over the administration of Kosovo, then we established a big presence here, as you well know. But, you, you couldn’t really build an embassy at that point, it takes several years to build an embassy because of all the security considerations and everything. So, we ended up just getting a whole neighborhood at the top of Dragodan {circles finger in air}, up near Film City¹³, and we had, I don’t know, twenty or thirty houses. It was like a couple of streets and different offices were in different houses and the big house up in the center was where the chief of mission was... And notice that I’m not saying ambassador because we could not say ambassador until Kosovo became an independent country.

So, it was always the chief of mission, and, and we had a lot of people, I mean it was dozens of people at that time. Maybe even a hundred or more, but of course we had a lot of guards, we had a lot of local employees, both Albanian and Serbian, and a handful of others. We tried to have full language capabilities, especially in my office, which was public affairs, and it was vital that we were able to provide interpreters for all the meetings that were going to be held. To be able to produce press releases and materials in all the needed languages, and so we had a very diverse staff from day one.

The... so as we proceeded to work, you know, I was living in a house up there and it was, it was interesting for me because when I looked out the back window, from my bedroom, I was looking down on what I later found out was the Faculty of Architecture for the University of Pristina. You know the parallel university, and I could look down into this unfinished building, it had no windows, you know it was just the concrete and the red bricks. You know that was all it was, but there was no glass and the students were sitting on benches inside this unfinished building, bundled up in coats and hats and gloves during the winter, and they had their drawing boards and t-squares and everything. And I would just stand up there and watch this and think, “you know, my god, how can they want to study so much” (chokes up).

And, so anyway we started, we, back in ‘96 and ‘97 we did visit a number of different faculties and that was where I first learned about the educational system here, and, you know, seeing, like, the little kids. You know, for primary and secondary schools where the children were studying in all the different houses and buildings and store fronts and alike, and then visiting the different faculties. I visited law

¹³ Film City is a military base that serves as the headquarters for the Kosovo Force (KFOR), located on the heights of Pristina, next to Arbëria Park.

and architecture and, I think, engineering, and some others, you know, to see, you know, how students were studying.

And...that was when we first got the idea for starting an American university here, and I actually visited with Dr. Rugova back in, I think it was '97, and we developed a proposal for a university that would be teaching in English, it would be American style. We wanted it to be in English so that it could be integrated because I knew the Albanian kids would be happy to study in English and the Serbian kids would also be happy to study in English, and that was probably the only way we could get them into the same classroom together.

Albanian students were not going to learn Serbian, to go to a Serbian university and, likewise, the Serbian kids were not about to learn Albanian and go to an Albanian university, but if both groups had to suffer, they would do it together (smiles). As long as both groups were equally handicapped and both groups had to go through the struggle to learn English and both groups had to suffer together, then we could make it work. You know, then we could actually start to integrate, you know, like a new generation and that was the impetus behind doing a foreign language university in the beginning.

But Dr. Rugova, who was an academic himself, understandably, he said, "this is not the time to start it", and, you know, there's just too much going on, we got too many other things happening, it will be hard to get approvals, you know, eccetera, eccetera. So we just set the idea aside, at the time, because it was just not the right time.

So, as soon as we came, as soon as I came back after the... in the year 2000, now we started thinking more seriously about starting a university because we had the capability of doing it. Under the UN administration we knew we could get all the approvals we needed to start everything, it would not be a problem, but money was the issue, and, you know, because it's not cheap to start a university as you would expect.

But, we had started, I say we, the US government had started an American university in Bulgaria, at Blagoevgrad, and it was a very good university, and, in fact, the second chief of mission, who came in, Ambassador John Menzies. And, I say ambassador because he was already an ambassador from his previous assignment and you keep the ambassador title for life. Okay, so we could legitimately call him Ambassador Menzies, like, within the office, but in public we always referred to him as the chief of mission. But Ambassador Menzies was the one who had started the American university of Bulgaria in Blagoevgrad, and so when he arrived in the second year.

Chris Dell was my first ambassador, my first chief of mission, but that was only for a year. And when I brought up the idea of an American university, as I remember, Chris Dell was like, "yeah, good idea, why not?" You know, "we don't have any money for it right now but it's a nice idea", so, you know, "let's keep it in mind", and then when Ambassador Menzies came he thought it was a great idea and he put me in touch with the president of, in Bulgaria, of the American university in Bulgaria.

So, I actually went to Blagoevgrad and I saw the university, visited the campus there, talked to students, met with the president, and we invited them to come to Kosovo. I say them, the president

and his wife because she also was part of the university... and they came to, they came to Kosovo. We met in the lobby of the Grand Hotel, that was the only hotel they could stay in at the time, and that's a whole other experience (smiles). But, they, we met at the Grand Hotel and they, what we initially agreed was that they would do a study to kind of figure out, like a strategy for doing this, and initially we thought it might just be a branch of the university in Bulgaria. It would be like AUB [American University Bulgaria] in Kosovo. But, after they, you know, got into it, saw what was going to be needed, did a feasibility study, you know, they figured it was, really, probably not going to work very well.

So we ended up deciding to go on our own. So, I needed some start up money. So I thought, you know, naive that I was, I thought 100,000 dollars would probably be enough to get things started (smiles). So I... I thought, "well, where can we get 100,000 dollars?" I knew I didn't have it in my budget, you know, at the US office, and I couldn't spend it like that anyway.

So, it was suggested that we go talk to Dr. Bukoshi¹⁴. So I met with Dr. Bukoshi in his office, here in town, and I pitched the idea of an American university to him and his, his response was very positive. He said, "yes, this is a great idea, we need to do this. Let me", and I asked him for 100,000 dollars (laughs). Which I thought, "oh my god. How do you ask for 100,000 dollars?" (laughs), and, you know, but he said, "let me think about it", and what I didn't realise was that... I didn't even know about the existence of UFORK¹⁵, but, what, the reason he put me off was that he had to consult with UFORK and talk to the other people back in Germany and Switzerland to see, you know, if they would do this.

But then two weeks later he [Bukoshi] asked me to come back to his office and he said, "we're ready to give you", I think the amount was 1.8 million dollars. He said, "this is all the money that's left in the fund, and if you had come to us a year earlier we would have given you a lot more because this is exactly what Kosovo needs". And I totally agreed with him but to get that 1.8 million dollars took some time because a lot of it was in Switzerland and there was all these laws and regulations around how NGOs could use their money and transferring it out of the country and stuff. And that was all done by Louis Sell¹⁶, who was hired by AUK¹⁷ to, to kind of set up the university because I could not actually do that much on a daily basis for getting the university going, because, you know, I had my other job, I was working for the US office.

So, early on we set up the, we made the initial effort to set up the AUK foundation. That was in New York, and we... they brought on a couple of people using that initial seed money that Dr. Bukoshi gave us, that UFORK gave us, and then we started thinking, "okay, where can we find, you know, buildings for the campus, where can we find, you know, a campus to put this". And at first we, we looked at a big

¹⁴ Bujar Bukoshi was Prime Minister of the Republic of Kosova from 1991-2000, one of the founders of the Democratic League of Kosovo and associate of Ibrahim Rugova.

¹⁵ UFORK (the Union Fund for the Restoration of Kosovo) provided the initial funding for AUKF (American University in Kosovo Foundation).

¹⁶ Louis Sell was an American Diplomat to the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

¹⁷ AUK (American University in Kosovo).

tract of land in Hajvalia, out near Gračanica, that the municipality was willing to give us but it was completely undeveloped.

So there were no roads, no water lines, no power, nothing and it was going to be a huge, hugely expensive project to get that going. So, I came back to the municipality and explained the problem there and they said, “well, there’s this other campus out near Gërmia, it’s on the road to Gërmia, on the left. It used to be a tourism college but it’s heavily damaged now and there’s some refugees living in it, and so forth. Let’s go look at that and maybe that could be suitable for you”.

So we go out there (laughing), and it was a wreck, I mean, an absolute disaster. You know, the buildings, there was water leaking everywhere {looking up}, the windows were blown out, I mean, there was a lot of damage from the war, and there were refugees living there. People who were homeless from villages, you know, out in Kosovo and stuff, and, you know, we couldn’t just, like, throw these people out in the street. But, at least we had a piece of land, with buildings and this could become a campus.

So then we thought, “okay, where do we go from this? In terms of, like, turning this into a real college”, and one of my staff members suggested Mr. Behgjet Pacolli¹⁸, and so, I had a meeting with Mr. Pacolli. The first meeting was, I can’t remember the name of the restaurant, but it was at the end of the building, upstairs {points}, and it’s like, on the end of the building, kind of going around. There was a big restaurant up there and I met Mr. Pacolli there, they had blocked off a big section of the restaurant, so it was private and everything (smiles) ... and he loved the idea of setting up this university and he was very enthusiastic about supporting it, and ultimately, what he agreed to do was to just completely rebuild and reconstruct that campus ... and that’s the campus that you now have for, what became RIT Kosovo¹⁹.

Now, how did RIT get into it? (smiles) Well the state department had a conference, in Zagreb, for public affairs officers that I had to go to, and that was my first visit to Zagreb, which I really enjoyed. But, one of the people, one of the guests at this reception was a man named Don Hudspeth, who was the... He was the head of RIT Dubrovnik, their Dubrovnik campus, and I didn’t know anything about Dubrovnik but, you know, in retrospect I would love to go see Dubrovnik (laughs). But Don was there and he and I just got to talking and I said, “you know, we’re starting up an American university in Kosovo, maybe we could somehow partner with you”, and he said, “oh, you need to talk to Jim Myers”, and he gave me Jim Myers’ email address and, you know, phone number and everything in Rochester. He said, “just talk to him and see if you can do something with RIT”.

So I wrote to Jim and I told him all about this project, what we were trying to do, the support we were getting from the Kosovo government, from the private sector, from, you know, the political class, everybody, and, Jim was very interested in trying to do something with us. So, he came to visit Kosovo,

¹⁸ Behgjet Pacolli is a politician and businessman who served as Deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo from 2011 to 2014 and President of Kosovo in early 2011.

¹⁹ RIT (Rochester Institute of Technology).

saw what we were doing and RIT agreed to get involved with AUK. So we set up AUK initially to have RIT as kind of a contractor, administrating the programme, but then it grew into essentially a branch campus of RIT.

Now you have to understand that in the United States, the Rochester Institute of Technology [RIT] is a top university, it is a major university. It has a global reputation, an amazing campus in upstate New York, it's one of the top engineering and technical schools. It's just, you couldn't have a better partner, and so I was just super excited that we might be able to have somebody like RIT working with us, and when Jim started talking about issuing RIT degrees here in Kosovo and students being able to get their degrees and having, you know, their academic programme and all this stuff. Well, you know, it seemed like the sky was the limit at that point (smiles).

So, Jim got very involved, we put him in touch with all of the players and everybody, he helped identify, you know, people to work with us. We had the foundation [UFORK], and initially the foundation had Akan Ismaili and Xhulieta Mushkolaj. Both of whom I'm sure you know, and they were my first employees at USOP [US Office Pristina]. They both worked with me in my office and they had actually started working for me back in '96, they were literally our first employees at the US office, because we only hired the best (smiles).

So they [Hasan and Juliet] got involved in, in setting up the foundation and serving on the board and guiding the direction of AUK. Along with other people, including some Albanian Americans, people from the diaspora, and it just took off and grew and now you have a very successful American university here, and, for me, that is by far the most important thing the US office, slash US Embassy has been able to do in Kosovo. I think that is a permanent legacy of the US presence in Kosovo, and ultimately it's going to make a bigger difference in the country than probably anything else because you're generating a whole new class of college graduates.

People who are fluent in English, who have critical thinking skills, who are able to function and work in teams at a very good level, who have public speaking skills, presentation skills, and they're able to interact with the rest of the world very well... And that's why an American university, can be, can play such a critical role in a country like this, coming out of war, coming out of conflict, coming out of, you know, ethnic and social rupture. You know, it can be an instrument of healing, and I hope in time, AUK have more students from minority communities in it, just so we can begin to rebuild, or even build new networks between young people from the different ethnic groups.

If you look at the RIT network, you know there's an RIT campus in Prague, there's one in Dubrovnik, you've got the one here, they're talking about one in Albania now, and if you think about how this can integrate students in the Balkans. You know, your Albanian students meet students in the Czech Republic, they do projects with students in Dubrovnik, with the Croatian students, and before you know it you have these networks building across European countries that promote economic development, that promote trade, that promote business development. Internationalising, you know, trade and everything, and, of course, what is the language of international commerce? It's English.

So, you know, you have these students who have these skills, who are able to embrace and use all the current technology, the new technologies and put these things to work for Kosovo, and we've seen, you know, graduates now are becoming ministers and ambassadors, and, you know, everything... And that is, over the next several decades, over the next two or three generations it's going to have a profound impact on the country. And, again, that's why I think this is the best part of the American legacy, and it's not, and it's being supported by the Albanian diaspora, by the Albanian community here, but I also hope to see it supported by people who are not Albanians. I would like to see it get support from American and European foundations, more support from governments.

I'd like to see rich people in Belgrade provide scholarships for Kosovo Serbs to go to AUK. I mean that would be fantastic if something like that could happen, and, but in any case, as RIT Kosovo, now as we call it, it is a branch campus. As RIT Kosovo grows over the coming years and develops more and more programmes and, you know, gets more degree options and more students go to Rochester to study, or go to the other campuses, we're gonna see the influence of AUK growing and growing, and having a bigger, more positive impact on Kosovo in the years to come. And to me, that's exactly what we wanted it to do (smiles).

Anita Susuri: Yeah, it's a very good plan. I hope it will be something like that.

Michael McClellan: Well, as we say in Iraq, inshallah.

Part Three

Anita Susuri: Mr. McClellan, I want to talk more about your time in '96, '97.

Michael McClellan: Sure.

Anita Susuri: This was a complex time.

Michael McClellan: Very.

Anita Susuri: The politics, for social, everything. But I am more interested to know, the first time you came, what was your idea of Kosovo and did you think it was going to be worse, were you expecting something better?

Michael McClellan: Honestly I had no idea, I literally had no idea of anything about Kosovo. I mean I knew from, from having studied Yugoslavia in the past, that there were these two autonomous regions of Serbia. You know, you had, what?

Anita Susuri: Vojvodina²⁰.

Michael McClellan: Vojvodina for the Hungarians and Kosovo for the Albanians, and the argument was that neither of these groups needs a republic because they have their own countries. You know, there's Hungary [gestures up], so we'll have a region for the Hungarians, there's Albania [gestures down], so we'll have a region for the Albanians but neither one needs to be a republic. They can just exist within the republic of Serbia, and that argument kind of made sense, you know, on some level, but when Yugoslavia was united it was obviously a very different country and, but that's really all I knew about it.

And, like I said, when the guy first asked me to go to Kosovo, I honestly, really had not heard of it because even, my limited studies of Yugoslavia. Because remember I said I was mostly studying the Soviet Union, I was mainly studying Russian and Russia and all things Russian, and, you know, all the other cultures and things within the Soviet Union. I was interested in Yugoslavia but I had not really had a chance yet to study it.

So, when I came down to Kosovo one of the first books I read, and don't hit me (smiles), was *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*²¹. Okay, because that was the book that was out there about, you know, Kosovo and, you know, Serbia, and all this history and everything. And I read that and I thought, "okay, I can see why this is important to, to Serbia but this doesn't really mesh with what I'm seeing on the ground here". You know, I get what she's saying and I understand her arguments but this was also written back in, what, the 1940s or something, and I knew it did not make sense in the current reality, today.

So, I started reading other things and unfortunately there wasn't much in English available from the Albanian perspective. So, I was relying on conversations and interviews with people and I started to develop this greater understanding of... of the history of Kosovo and how the population dynamics had shifted over the centuries. How the, the dominant groups, mainly Serbs and Albanians, how these two dominant groups had related to each other over the centuries and how that had changed over the centuries, and also I started learning a lot more about Albania.

And there's a very good book, and I can't remember the name of it off hand, but it was written by a woman named Rose Wilder, and she was the daughter of the woman who wrote the series that's very famous in America, called *Little House on the Prairie*, and Rose Ingalls Wilder was her name. And, the book she wrote about Albania, it was a travel book where she had this old car and was driving around the Albanian mountains and everything, and just talked about all of her experiences. It was an absolutely wonderful book. One of the best books I've ever read and I really got a super positive view of Albania's traditions and culture and, you know, the village life, and the mountains, and you know, vendettas. I mean everything, it was all just fascinating.

And, so when I started, so I had this book learning from *Black Lamb Grey Falcon*, but then I had

²⁰ An autonomous province that occupies the northernmost part of Serbia.

²¹ *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey Through Yugoslavia* is a travel book written by Dame Rebecca West, published in 1941.

experiential learning from being here and talking to people, and so I began to develop a greater understanding of the dynamics of the society. And, so, that determined what kind of programming we would be able to do and I was determined that we were not going to talk to just one ethnic group.

Okay, so it was kind of funny actually, because of my experience as a diplomat I spoke Russian and Arabic to some level. I mean I was not really fluent in either one of them but enough, and I'm also Orthodox, and so I was able to talk to Bishop Artemia and other Orthodox clerics. Usually in Russian because they all understood Russian (laughs). So I was actually speaking to them sometimes in Russian, but when we got into heavy conversations I'd always use an interpreter because, you know, Russian was more like just to get acquainted and to have light conversations and then we would switch to Serbian and my interpreter would, you know, really get into the details.

With the Islamic community, this was... Dr. Rexhep Boja, who I was very, very fond of. I used to visit them [Islamic community] on a fairly regular basis, and with him I would speak Arabic. He was educated in Saudi Arabia, if I'm not mistaken, his Arabic was fluent, of course, as any Imam would be, and I would end up speaking Arabic. Again, to some level with the Islamic clerics because I didn't have either Albanian or Serbian, but that was enough to like, start the relationship and kind of get off to a good start, and to begin building a friendship.

And so I had very good relations with both communities of religious leaders and that was a critical factor in a thing we did back in '90, I think it was actually in early '97, when we started doing this. But I made a tour of Kosovo speaking in mosques and the Islamic community set this up for me. One of the things that I realised early on was that nobody in Kosovo, I shouldn't say nobody, but the general public did not understand our [US] policy on Kosovo.

Now, like it or not, our [US] policy at that time [1997] was that Kosovo should stay part of Serbia and we did not support independence. That was our policy and I was not in a position to change it but I had to communicate it. So, whenever I was doing interviews with journalists, and I did quite a number of them, I would explain our policy but it never made it into print (smiles). And, so I just couldn't get... get it out there for people to understand.

Now, it was important that people understand this because if you want to turn... if you want to turn to violence as a political tool, you need to have a clear understanding of what's at stake, and you better understand what your friends are thinking before you go into it. It's your choice, if you want to go with violence that's your choice, if you want to stay with peaceful resistance, that's your choice, if you want to just go home and eat *flia*²², that's your choice. Okay, but whatever you choose, you need to understand the truth about what everybody's thinking here.

So, I thought very early on, that, you know, if I can't get... if I can't tell people what our policy is, if I can't get that out through the media then I've got to find another way. And the other way that we figured out was through the Islamic community and going to the mosques. Now, granted we were only going to be talking to men but at least we'd be talking to a lot of men and then they might go and talk to their families and tell their families about it. And then we would also, at the same time though, try to do meetings with political groups that would be integrated, in the sense that men and women

²² A traditional dish in Albanian cuisine consisting of crepe-like layers cooked with cinders under a lid.

would both be coming to those meetings.

We were really able to speak clearly and... coherently, I guess, for lack of another word, about US policy, and it was not a popular thing to hear, it was not what people wanted to hear, but I had to tell them. And so it worked out very well actually to do this through the Islamic community and to do it through these other political groups, where we were able to meet with both men and women. And so, I think a lot of that is people became aware of what our actual policy was. I think that may have changed the thinking for a lot of people, and then, like I said, it's up to you if you want to choose resistance, or if you want to choose peaceful... peaceful resistance or violent resistance. "That's not for us to decide, we're not going to tell you to do that, it's your choice, but here's what's at stake if you choose to do it".

And then, of course, once the violence happened and once, you know, you had the ethnic cleansing, all bets were off the table and our [US] policy changed overnight, and then we saw that independence was the only long term solution. And, so we pursued that through the UN, you know, it took a while, it was not going to be an overnight process, but in time it happened, and, I, I, to this day feel like our contribution to making that happen came through greater awareness, in the general population, of what our policy was.

I remember the Bytyqi²³ brothers, when that happened, I remember... I mean, of course, the... well the thing with Adem Jashari at the Jashari compound, that happened, I think, right before I left. That was like, wasn't that in '97?

Anita Susuri: Seventh of March, '98.

Michael McClellan: '98, okay. Well the UÇK was just starting to get active in '97, and, you know, it was out in the country, it was way out in the middle of nowhere. You know, we had to look on a map to see where it was, you know things like that. And, it was dangerous, I mean the embassy wouldn't let any of us go out there, you know, because there was so much tension. You know, between the Serbs and Albanians, and the Serb military presence was very heavy there.

So, that was just beginning when I left, and then from... basically from about August '97 until... until the NATO bombing campaign concluded. I came back about August 2000, more or less. So that was like three years, I guess, that I wasn't here.

Anita Susuri: Did any incident happen in '96, '97? Do you remember any of them?

Michael McClellan: Well, I mean... I mean, I remember seeing police, you know... Serbian police were not the most enlightened police in the world, they needed a lot of human rights training (laughs). But, because I remember... I remember one time an Albanian, it was an Albanian woman, I guess she was in her 20s, who had come to my office in Dragodan, you know, to talk about something. I got a lot of people coming there who had, who had, like, questions about their social security in America because,

²³ Three American-Kosovo Albanian brothers and members of the Kosovo Liberation Army who were killed by Serbian police shortly after the end of the Kosovo War.

you know, their husband had gone to work in America and he had died. There were several families that this happened to and they couldn't get their social security checks. This was, you know, banking was an issue, mailing the checks was an issue, and just, you know, consular stuff, and so we ended up having to do a lot of that kind of stuff with people here in Kosovo that had nothing to do with the politics, just trying to solve individual problems.

Or, you know, someone was in the States [US], you know, working and their kid was born and the kid needed a new passport, but "I can't get to Belgrade, you know, I can't go to Belgrade to get it. Can you help me get a passport for my, you know, three year old?" You know we got a lot of that kind of stuff.

Anita Susuri: Did you do this...

Michael McClellan: Well, yeah, I mean we would do whatever we had to do to help people out. And, you know, I also had people where... I remember one day, this father came into the office with his two sons, and the two sons had been kind of beat up, and, you know, I was like, "okay, what do you want me to do?" and he [the father] said, "I just want you to see what happened on the bus today". You know, they were riding the bus, they had these municipal buses and you know, they, "my two sons were riding the bus, coming back from school or going to school and some Serb highschool students beat them up and called them šiptars²⁴ and all this stuff, and I just want you to see how my kids were treated." And that was all, you know, they just wanted to have a witness and I had a bunch of people like that over the course of time.

I remember one guy came in, one time, and he literally dropped his pants right in the middle of my office, and I mean all the way, and showed how he had been beaten on his buttocks and legs with truncheons, you know, the nightsticks, and he just had these wounds all over his backside. And, he said, "you know, I just want you to see this so you know what we're going through." And we had quite a number of those kinds of cases to happen.

And then, I think my successor had even more of those, as things started heating up. But we would tell them... we would usually refer them to Adem Demaçi's NGO, I wish I could remember the name of it. But, we'd say, "it's important that you document this, okay, just get it in the record, take pictures, give a statement, you know, just put it in the record that this happened", you know, "I can't go find these guys on the bus and get them arrested, I can't pay your hospital bills, or you know, do anything like that but at least get it documented". And, you know, quite often they would do that, you know, we would certainly make note of it.

We had some cases where Albanian activists were arrested for no seemingly good reason. There never was a good reason back then but I would then go to the Serbian authorities here and say, "this person was arrested, I know you have him, we're going to keep asking you about this person, we need to get reports about it or I'm going to tell the state department in Washington that you're not doing something, and if this person dies we're going to know about it". And their prison treatment would change. You know, I mean, just putting them on notice that they were being watched, you know, would make a difference, and sometimes I couldn't do anymore than that but it would help.

Anita Susuri: There were also some political prisoners back then.

²⁴ A derogatory term used to insult Albanians.

Michael McClellen: Yeah

Anita Susuri: Did you visit them?

Michael McClellen: No, I mean, I couldn't visit them because they were not my country. See if there was an American that was in prison, then you have Vienna Convention²⁵ obligations to let a consular official visit them in prison and bring them, you know, food or comic books or, you know, whatever they want. You do have rights to do that for your own country but when it comes to doing it for another country it's a different issue.

But, since we were the only diplomats here, you know, their families would come and tell us things, and so their families would come and say that, you know, "so and so, my brother, my son, my father, my uncle, whatever, is in this prison, this is happening to him. Is there anything you can do?" And then we would just go to, again, to the Serbian authorities and say, you know, "we know this person is in this prison, you're obligated under Serbian law to provide certain things, certain protections, you know, certain human rights practices, we're following this case and if you... if anything bad happens to this guy, it's going in the human rights report that we do every year, and you'll be on record as having done this and that's not going to be good for Serbia's image".

And sometimes that's all you can do but that's important that you do it, and that's why these NGOs here were so important at that time. I mean they still are, but when it comes to situations where you have gross human rights abuses and, you know, conflicts, ethnic conflicts, whatever, documentation is vital, and you've got to be able to show evidence, at some point, of what's going on.

And, you know, this is why Adem Dumaçi's work was so vital at that time because, you know, you would go to his office and, I mean, literally this entire wall [gestures around room], of space that size covered, you know just bookshelves, with reams and reams of testimony and data and photographs and tape recordings, and everything else. And, you know, they had this massive documentation of what was going on here.

Anna Di Lellio: The council

Michael McClellen: Sorry?

Anna Di Lellio: The Council for...

Anita Susuri: KMDLNJ.

²⁵ A United Nations convention on the law of treaties for international relations.

Michael McClellen: Yeah, that's it. Yeah I just couldn't remember the name but I'm getting older (laughs). But at any rate, you know, that's why that kind of stuff was so vital, and when we would go and meet with them, they would be pulling notebooks off the wall and opening them up and showing us things. Where we knew it was not just a bunch of crazy Albanians talking, you know, it was like "holy crap! Look what is happening to these people". And that's... once you start convincing a bunch of diplomats that this kind of thing is going on, they [diplomats], in turn, are convincing their capitals and their foreign ministries of what's going on and that's how policy gets changed.

So, the work of an NGO to meet with a lower level embassy officer and to show the evidence of what's happening and to give them 'ammunition' {uses air quotations} that they can use in their reporting back to their capitals, that's how things change.

Part Four

Anita Susuri: Would some international organizations, like Amnesty International²⁶, work with you also?

Michael McClellen: They would check in, you know, again, everybody, every foreigner who came to Kosovo at that time would check into our office (smiles). Okay, you know, that was your first stop and you knew if you went to the US office... first of all you had people who spoke English, so there was no problem communicating, secondly, there was a really nice cafe next door and you'd probably get a nice cup of macchiato, free (smiles), and, you know, you could sit and talk for an hour, two hours, however long you wanted.

The Americans were always happy to get visitors and to talk to them. It's just part of being an American I guess, but it was also our job, you know, and we were very happy to meet people and brief them on what we knew at that point, and again, to make introductions. You know, my staff could just call over to LDK and say, "hey, we've got these people from such and such. Can they come over and see Dr. Rugova?" And, you know, they would say, "yeah, come over at one o'clock". Okay, so we would keep them entertained until one o'clock, or we'd call Adem Dumaçi, or we would call down to Prizren to go see Bishop Artemia, or out to Gračanica. We just had everybody's phone number.

And then, as these various diplomats and NGOs came here and met people, they'd start developing their own contacts, they wouldn't necessarily need us anymore but they would still keep checking in because we were the only constant presence, that was international. Okay, obviously there's a permanent presence of people who lived here but you always want to cross check your sources.

²⁶ A global organization that help to tackle human rights abusers worldwide.

Okay, so yeah, Albanians are telling me all these awful things and the Serbs are telling me that everything's peachy keen and there's no problems, you know, what's the truth here? And so they would check with us because we were the internationals.

And at that time, I was the only American in Kosovo, I was the only diplomat. No, I take it back, there were two Americans, one of them worked for some NGO, I think... it was a humanitarian NGO, mercy, Mercy Corps²⁷. There was one American guy working at Mercy Corps and there was also one American woman but I think the two of them kind of switched out. So, it was me and Mercy Corps and we were it, you know, there were no other Americans down here.

At that time there were five foreigners, total, that we knew of, living in Kosovo. Besides me, they were all NGO workers and it was you know, Mercy Corps, Doctors Without Borders, you know, things like that but it was Europeans and Americans, but I was the only diplomat. So, now you look at Kosovo and there's like thousands of foreigners, you know, running around everywhere, you can't avoid them. But at that time I was it, you know, and so everywhere I went the police and intelligence from Belgrade were following me, and every Albanian knew that if they talked to me, they were going into the files of Serbian intelligence, but at that point they didn't care. You know, because they... if anything that might have even provided some protection.

A lot of times people were called into the police for questioning after they would talk to us, and, you know, I always told people just, you know, "tell them the truth, you don't need to protect us, you don't need to lie for us or anything else. Be honest about it, tell them what you were here for. I mean, you can tell them what I said, for example. You don't need to hide or, you know, protect us or, you know, tell them anything wrong". They may or may not want to tell why they came to see me, and that's their choice but as far as I'm concerned, you know, I assume anything I said in my office was recorded anyway.

I remember shortly after we moved into the... to that, to the little US office in Dragodan, back in '96. I remembered shortly after that there was an Albanian family about half a block away that was moved out of their house, and we saw all these blue vehicles, you know, with Serbian license plates unloading equipment there the next day. And it was like all this electronic equipment, it was pretty clear this was a monitoring station, you know, to follow us, and they were I'm sure eavesdropping on everything that happened in my office. I'm sure they knew every word that was spoken in our meetings, but we didn't care, you know, because, I mean, to be honest, I wanted them to know what we were learning about and how we were gathering information, and how we were developing our understanding of what was going on down here.

²⁷ A global team of humanitarians working together on the front lines of crisis, disaster, poverty, and climate change.

That they were on notice, they could no longer lie about it because, you know, we were here on the ground doing our own thing and we could learn ourselves. And, you know, with the police intelligence, I remember a number of times, my car was a purple Nissan Pathfinder, and it had Belgrade diplomatic plates for the US Embassy. So, obviously it was the only one down here.

So, every time I would drive around town, again, you [Anita] don't remember this but the Serbian police would patrol in body armor, with helmets and they look like full combat troops, and at night especially, you would see them walk around in pairs. Not regular traffic cops, these were always, like, fully armored, soldier types. You know, heavily armed and they would be walking around town, they would go into clubs and restaurants and check everybody's IDs, they were very intimidating.

But every time... a number of times I would be in a restaurant and my car would be right outside and I would see them, like, come around and look in the windows and I would take the key fob and go, "woop woop" (laughs), you know with the thing, and they would kind of jump around and I'd wave at them and then they would turn around walk away (smiles). Because they knew they had been spotted, and that was kind of fun actually, but they never, ever talked to me, never bothered me, other than just kind of observing from a distance. So that was always kind of interesting (smiles).

Anita Susuri: I'm also interested to know, how was this life in Pristina at the time? Did you make any friends?

Michael McClellen: Oh, I had a lot of friends, I mean everybody in town knew of me, I mean, I'm the only, I mean look... I can walk down a street in probably any country of the world and most people immediately say, "he's an American". You know, I smile, I have that look, the way I walk, the way I swing my arms, the way I look. You know, I look people in the eye, I say "hi" to people no matter where I am. They just know right off the bat I'm an American, and of course, back then I was on TV a lot.

I was interviewed by RTK²⁸ and various TV shows, I was interviewed in the press quite a bit. There were a number of magazines that were published at the time. I remember Bukurie Gjonbali was a journalist for a magazine, I can't remember the name of it, but it was like a women's magazine.

Anna Di Lellio: *Kosovarja?*

Michael McClellen: What?

Anna Di Lellio: *Kosovarja?*

²⁸ Radio Television Kosovo, the public service broadcaster in Kosovo.

Michael McClellen: No, I just don't remember. But, in any case, you had a very active media scene here and I was interviewed very widely. So, and they saw me on TV a lot, sometimes just making press statements or whatever. So, people recognised me just about anywhere I went.

I remember one time, I was down in Macedonia, in some Albanian village out in the mountains, somewhere out in the middle of nowhere and I walked into this little store and the guy looks at me and goes, "*zoti* (Mr.) Michael" {points} (laughs). And I didn't, you know, that was all he said but... you know, he said something about *televizor* (television) and, you know even down there, I mean, they were watching the shows and he recognised me, in this little village, in the middle of nowhere.

So, you know, people recognised, they knew me, they liked to see me around town. Very often somebody would pay for my meal or my coffee, or whatever, and the waiter would just say, "oh, it's been paid for, don't worry about it". You know, things like that, so there was a lot of hospitality and even... Now, there was a time in March of '90... no that was after the war, that was a different time.

But, when I came back in 2000 it was a little bit different then, I mean I was still on the media, quite a lot even then because I was a spokesman for the US office. But, even after the March riots²⁹, which I think were in 2000...

Anita Susuri: Four

Michael McClellen: Four [2004], yeah. I was... I was on TV with a group of political leaders with a British diplomat, named Carne Ross, and Carne and I, he was British, I'm the American... We had a very, very confrontational meeting on TV, with Albanian political leaders and we called them out for not taking a stronger stand against this ethnic violence. And, you know, the church that I occasionally attended, as I said I'm Orthodox [Christian], the church that I occasionally attended was attacked and burned, and I brought this up in the interview. You know, I said, "my own church was burned tonight and, you know, this, this is wrong you know, you can't do this. This is going to hurt Kosovo's cause badly, you need to take a stand on this", and they were very... their response was not very good.

But the next day... okay so that night and the next day, I went walking around town with my senior local employee and... because I wanted to gauge public opinion. I thought, "okay, I know everybody in Kosovo probably saw that interview, now let's see how they react to me on the street". ss a way of, kind of judging public opinion, and literally everywhere I went, people sitting in cafes, you know, they would go like... {grabs mug} they're sitting there drinking their macchiato and I would walk by and they would do this {raises mug} and smile. Or, you know, several people even came up to me and said,

²⁹ On the 17-18th of March, 2004, violence erupted after the unsubstantiated reports that three Kosovo Albanian boys had drowned after being chased by a group of Kosovo Serbs. This led to attacks on Kosovo Serb communities and cultural heritage by Albanian crowds that left 19 people dead and hundreds wounded.

“thank you for what you said last night”, and these were Albanians and, you know, I did not get a single negative reaction from anybody, anywhere.

Now, you could say, “well, you know, what do you expect, you’re an American diplomat, of course they weren’t going to confront you”, but people would say negative things to me if they wanted to. And on other issues at other times in the past I, you know, had people say negative things to me.

You know, what was happening at that point was an occasional armed attack on a checkpoint or, you know, on a cop, or something, it was, it was very... I don’t want to say, lowkey, not exactly the right [word]... small scale, but an actual armed rebellion, you know, with a lot of guns and firepower and, you know, a lot of violence and death, that had not started yet. It was just beginning, and, you know, I remember one time (smiles), this was kind of funny. You know, we tried to monitor both RTK and... RTS, I guess it was.

Anna Di Lellio: It was RTS.

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Michael McClellen: Yeah, there was like, you know, Serbian TV down here [Kosovo] and they also had Albanian language programs on Serbian TV, and I remember one time the newscaster who, it was a woman, she was doing the news in Albanian, on Serbian television and she said, you know, “blah, blah, blah Kosovo i Metohija”. And it was like she was so used to saying, “Kosovo i Metohija” that she, she was mixing it in with the Albanian and, you know, instead of saying Kosova, or you know, you know whatever the politically correct term was, she would always use the Serbian construction, in Serbian, in her Albanian language broadcast (smiles). You know, which the Albanians were just laughing at this, you know, that it’s so absurdly propagandistic and badly done, but you know, it was all part of the game, I guess, at the time.

But, in any case, I had not met anyone involved in that, this was still all out in the country, you know, like out in the countryside, in Dukagjin and, you know, the other areas and we had literally no contact with them at that point.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned the Bytyqi family, Bytyqi brothers.

Michael McClellen: Well, yeah. That would have been after 2000 right?

Anita Susuri: Yes.

Michael McClellen: Yeah, so when that happened [the murder of the Bytyqi brothers], you know, again, it was this very alarming thing that we were afraid was going to trigger more violence. You know,

you had this killing of three brothers, obviously a cold blooded murder, you know, this was not... there was just no way to justify it and...

Anita Susuri: They were American citizens.

Michael McClellen: Yeah and they were American citizens, so now it involved consular issues. You know, death certificates, possible social security disability benefits, you know... you know, dealing with their effects with the, you know, where did they want to be buried. I mean, they were buried here [Kosovo] but you know, sometimes when American citizens die abroad, even if they've been living abroad, they still want their bodies to be sent back to the States. And, you know, that's the kind of stuff that consular officials deal with.

So with the Bytyqi brothers, there were all these consular issues around it, but also just the escalation of violence, you know, that this could trigger more. And, back in my second time in Kosovo, from 2000 to 2004, there were constant things happening that, you know, like tit for tat violence. You know, ethnic attacks over here, something over here, you know, some kind of provocation over here {pointing left to right}. You know, there was just this constant stream of these things, whether it was at a Serbian monastery, or an Albanian village, or, you know, killings of people that was very suspect, you know and so on.

But, by that time we had a big political office, here, at the US office and I, as the public affairs guy did not really have to deal directly with them because other people were responsible for that but we still had to deal with the public... with the public affairs fallout. You know, with the impact on public opinion, you know, that sort of thing... and always trying to be a calming influence, you know, because that's something that the American Chief of Mission is always trying to do, is to calm things down. You know, to reassure people, to show that we're doing something, you know, to get them [public] to be patient. You know, that's just kind of a part of a diplomat's job. You're always trying to calm tensions and to get people to sit and talk instead of fighting.

Anita Susuri: Were you here in 2008, Independence Day?

Michael McClellen: No, missed that one unfortunately (smiles).

Anita Susuri: Did you watch?

Michael McClellen: Oh yeah, I mean, I was following it definitely from, you know, through TV and newspapers in the States, and so forth, but sadly I missed that. But I was here for 9/11 because that was a huge event, obviously for Americans but the way Kosovars reacted in support of the US over 9/11 was very... I mean it was amazing. The support that we got and the fact that, I think, that one of the pilots was a Kosovar Albanian, you know, who was hijacked, and, you know. So there was this Kosovo

angle to it, and a positive angle, not a negative, I mean, not that the hijackers were Kosovars or anything like that, and I think two of the window washers who were killed at the World Trade Center were from Kosovo. You know, there were just all these connections and it demonstrated how closely intertwined our countries were becoming and I think that's only gotten more so since then. And AUK is a big part of that too.

Anita Susuri: Sure.

Michael McClellan: That's [AUK] going to be an agent of greater integration between our countries in future generations. Every generation we're going to get closer and closer, and education is going to be a huge part of that.

Anita Susuri: I hope so. Thank you so much.

Michael McClellan: No, thank you.