

INTERVIEW WITH NERIMANE KAMBERI

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Present:

1. Nerimane Kamberi (Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. Korab Krasniqi (Interviewer)
4. Besarta Breznica (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: Mrs. Neriman, if you could introduce yourself, your date of birth, place of birth, anything about your family, your origin?

Nerimane Kamberi: My name is Nerimane Kamberi, I insist [on being called] Nerimane, now it's a linguistic matter that I was born called Neriman Kamberi, which shows where I come from. I come from Presheva, a city with an, let's say Ottoman culture like it was back then in former Yugoslavia. And my name is a Turkish name. And then when I came to live and study in Kosovo, they pronounced it as Nerimane, because Neriman sounds masculine [in Albanian]. I connected this to my origin.

I was born in Presheva and we migrated to Belgium, it was the '60s when they were looking for workers over there in Belgium. And my [paternal] aunt who... so to go back in history, of course that has remained in my memory, my aunt had left Presheva in the '50s, in Ranković's¹ time, in the time when Albanians suffered a lot and she went to live in Turkey. And actually she didn't return to Presheva for almost nine years, it was really exile, as I say the exile songs.

She didn't return for nine years but they didn't manage to create a new life there, to survive, and they came back. I remember images, I also write so I work a lot with images that are fixed in my mind. When she came to the front yard door, she passed out. I mean, because exile was really difficult. And they went to Belgium from there.

And as I said it was the '60s, the end of colonialism, and Belgium was a strong colonial power, they had created wealth and were rebuilding, building, rebuilding Belgium. And my aunt called my father, he

¹ Aleksandar Ranković (1909-1983) was a Serb partisan hero who became Yugoslavia's Minister of the Interior and head of Military Intelligence after the war. He was a hardliner who established a regime of terror in Kosovo, which he considered a security threat to Yugoslavia, from 1945 until 1966, when he was ousted from the Communist Party and exiled to his private estate in Dubrovnik until his death in 1983.

actually had lost his father and was very young, he was skilled because he had taken it upon himself to take care of the family and he worked in construction for eight years in Belgrade. So, he had experience and that was the generation of many Albanians, especially people from Presheva who worked in Belgrade, which was also being built.

And from there he gained a good skill and decided to go to Belgium. I wrote a story in French about exactly how I think of our move there, because I was one and a half years old, almost two years old but I don't remember. I remember from my mother's memory, from her stories, that difficult exile again and we lived in Belgium for 20 years.

And I was fed with two cultures which I continue to be fed with, two cultures and two memories. So, from my family's side I remember my great-grandfather, whose bones we haven't found yet. When he had fought with Serbs back then at the Sopot Bridge, my father says. And it's interesting maybe, I want to go to those places but I also don't want to. So, I never went, and that Sopot Bridge is very imaginary, where Albanians had been shot back then, my great-grandfather among them.

On the other hand my father's [paternal] uncle, who remained, and he spent 20 years in prison in Serbia, under very difficult conditions. Because he opposed the Serbs, he fought against them during the Second World War and on the other side it's also a symbol of how life defeats terror and death. Because he returned to Presheva after 20 years, he created a family, he had seven children. And so that was that memory.

The other culture which I was fed with and brought up in was the Belgian culture, let's say the Francophone culture. Respecting human rights, I lived there where everything was in order, where you weren't afraid of anything, where you had your rights as a foreigner and where you actually didn't feel like a foreigner. Even at school, my sisters, my brother and me, my brother wasn't born yet but we were very good students, always wanted to prove ourselves. And at home we had a very Albanian education.

So, my father was the one who pushed us, and I thank him, to always speak Albanian at home, to celebrate all the holidays, whether they were national, or religious, to have that. And he did all he could so that we could visit our hometown every summer, it was something very important for him. My family saved [money] their whole lives because we were six children and we were a family with average income. And he and my mom had two; they always had two paths for us to be educated and to love our homeland.

And we were raised with that, related to that culture about human rights, about respecting our symbols, our language, I got that from my family, but especially from the culture and the education I got in Belgium. So, naturally after I finished high school, a high school graduate, although I was really good in foreign languages, probably the best student, I spoke English, Flemish, German.

But, I wanted to study law, it was important for me when I came during the summer to Presheva, to Kosovo, always talking to family members and friends about the state of Albanians. We also had friends from Presheva who were political prisoners at the time, of course Adem Demaçi's² ideal and others. And even my teachers in high school [would ask], "Nerimane, do you want to study German or English?" I replied, "No, I want to study law."

It was the time when we would do, we would sign petitions for Amnesty International, we would sign petitions to protect animals, to protect humans, that was the spirit in Belgium which I wouldn't find when I came back here as a 16-17 year old. [Which is the time] when your character and ideals are actually formed. That's the first educational formation, let's also say patriotic, let's use that word too. And I studied law for two years in Belgium and that's where my desire to work towards that path increased even more.

In the meantime, I had written two novels in Belgium, two novels for young people. I published the first one there in French and I became, quotation marks, a sensation in Kosovo, in Albanian-inhabited places, because I was 14 years old and coming from, now they call it diaspora, back then we didn't use that term. But I was coming from Albanians abroad, from migrants and I was writing in French. It was an unknown literature here because they were crime novels and they were translated here by *Rilindja*,³ both the first and the second.

So, I became a popular name here. So, when my father decided to come back here because he was in pre-retirement in Belgium, there was an economic crisis, there were no jobs. But he also saw that it was time for our family to come back, to get an education here in Albanian, to create new lives here and we decided to come back to Presheva.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask you something before moving on there. There were many Albanians who left Kosovo to find work, diaspora as you mentioned. But only one member went abroad in most of them, for example the father, or the head of the house. How did it happen that your entire family went there?

Nerimane Kamberi: Yes, that is right because I have cousins in Presheva who had gone to Germany, but they went alone. It's a question that I would maybe ask my father, because I never did. I think that he suffered a lot, because he lived in Belgrade for eight years, he was unmarried at the time. Of course he suffered because his mother became a widow at a young age and his grandmother was disabled, I mean she couldn't walk anymore the moment her husband died.

² Adem Demaçi (1936-2018) was an Albanian writer and politician and longtime political prisoner who spent a total of 27 years in prison for his nationalist beliefs and political activities. In 1998 he became the head of the political wing of the Kosovo Liberation Army, from which he resigned in 1999.

³ *Rilindja*, the first newspaper in the Albanian language in Yugoslavia, initially printed in 1945 as a weekly newspaper.

And I think this is what influenced him to not want to go alone. And of course I think it was a good decision because first of all, based on when I see my cousins now. Or when I think of my late father-in-law who went alone, I'm sure they had, they had, they had a life, a life like in Turkish movies (laughs) how to put it, movies about migrants who sacrificed their life. They lived a very, very modest life and they always lacked connection.

I remember when my father-in-law would come back and didn't want to go outside, he only wanted his close ones around. I'm sure he had a feeling of his life as a sacrifice. But, my father didn't want that, he took my mother along. I know well that my mother suffered a lot because she went as a young bride, she didn't know the language. At first we didn't live in good conditions, I mean a modest house, in a modest village. I have memories about these but maybe I will now move away from that [topic], I remember the church helped us a lot when we went, as always.

Even in public schools, they were still Catholic at the time and I remember when I went and they took us to confess to the priest and he knew that we weren't a family with Catholic culture and religion. And he saw me, I was six years old and I remember it well as a memory, he said, "What are you looking for here?" I said, "I came here to confess like all students" (laughs). And I don't know, he said something nice, and he took me out of the church in a very slow and polite manner. And it's these things I mean, but then we became accustomed very quickly, my father worked a lot, my mother was a homemaker.

And the Municipality gave us a big apartment, with good conditions, because we were many children. And of course we were excellent, we never had issues in that aspect. I forgot to mention that with those, with my father's wishes for us to always be Albanian and not forget our homeland, he did everything he could to organize and open an Albanian school at that time. Of course, there was former Yugoslavia, we had Yugoslavia's Embassy in Belgrade, that of course dealt with its citizens, with Yugoslavians as we were called back then. But, my father did everything he could for the Albanian school to be opened and the Albanian school was opened and the teachers would come from Kosovo and teach us.

It was very interesting because we spoke Albanian, but at home we spoke the Presheva Albanian and she [the teacher] started with standard Albanian and at first we couldn't understand her that well. But, of course, the Albanian language, the first poems, the first authors and as a senior student, my graduation exam was comparing Naim Frashëri's⁴ *Bagëti e Bujqësi*⁵ [Alb.: Livestock and Agriculture] with a Latin author, let's say Virgil. And then even in university in Belgium, in my thesis I had *Bardha e*

⁴ Naim Frashëri was an Albanian poet and writer (1846-1900). He was one of the most prominent figures of the *Rilindja Kombëtare* (National Awakening), the nineteenth century Albanian national movement, together with his two brothers Sami and Abdyl. He is widely regarded as the national poet of Albania.

⁵ *Bagëti e Bujqësi* is a poem written by Naim Frashëri. This work was first published in Bucharest in 1886 and is considered his magnum opus. In *Bagëti e Bujqësi*, Naim Frashëri depicts the idyllic landscape of the village and nature of Albania.

Temalit by Pashko Vasa.⁶ This is very normalized today, but back then it was something rare and of course shows our identity in which we were brought up as a family.

Anita Susuri: Were there many Albanians there, did you have contact with them?

Nerimane Kamberi: Fortunately, there were, I will go back to exile again. Family members of my mother's family came shortly after, her sisters who helped her go through [the experience of] moving away from home. There were many Albanians, but we, of course, each of them dealt with their family. We met for celebrations, of course for Yugoslavia's holidays back then, for our own Albanian holidays, if there was a wedding or something. But at school there were very few foreigners, very, very few. Now the number has increased, we lived in a good, small city.

But, in the university where I was, it was an elite university. The reason was, it was very close by, it was a Jesuit university, so it was led by priests and that is part of the culture I grew up in, between both the mosque and the church, because in Presheva there is a mosque next to my house. I was raised hearing the call of the muezzin.⁷ While in Belgium both my school and my house were near the church and I always [heard] the bell sound, of course [also] my friends' rituals, funerals, weddings et cetera. And that is a great [cultural] wealth and on the other hand, it made it possible for me to see my country and of course to approach my country in a different manner.

Anita Susuri: You said that you studied for two years and then you came to Kosovo?

Nerimane Kamberi: Yes, yes.

Anita Susuri: What year was that in?

Nerimane Kamberi: '87.

Anita Susuri: '87. But what about, for example in '81 when there were the demonstrations,⁸ how did that impact you?

Nerimane Kamberi: So, I was, I was 14 years old, when we came back during the summer, it was talked about, of course we talked about it. It's not that we dealt with the '81 demonstrations that

⁶ Pashko Vasa (1825 – 1892), known as Vaso Pasha, was an Albanian writer, poet and publicist of the Albanian National Awakening, and Ottoman mutasarrif of Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate from 1882 until his death.

⁷ The muezzin is the person who gives the call to prayer in a mosque. The muezzin plays an important role in ensuring an accurate prayer schedule for the Muslim community.

⁸ On March 11, 1981, a plate was broken at the student canteen expressing dissatisfaction with poor student conditions, after which many students joined flipping tables. The event sparked a widespread student-led demonstration. The demand for better food and dormitory conditions was emblematic of the Albanian demand for equal treatment in Yugoslavia.

much, but of course we talked about it at the time. But to use an expression, entering Kosovo's fire, it was [when we] returned in '87-'88, because that is then connected to what I said, I was already known in Kosovo. Now, don't think it was on the same level as today, but they were familiar with my writings and I very quickly got in touch with the literary and journalist circles here.

Back then there was *Zëri i Rinisë* [Alb.: Voice of the Youth] and even during the time I was in Belgium, and also when we came back from Belgium, the Albanian school had organized it twice, traveling [around] Yugoslavia for two years straight, especially in Kosovo, and we came to the pines of Deçan as diaspora kids. And we became familiarized with the country and back then I was interviewed by *Zëri i Rinisë* about my writings and I started becoming part of those circles since then. And the fact that I spoke English, French, German and ever since the first journalists came, I started working with them as a translator, to inform them about Kosovo.

And of course back then we worked under very risky conditions because it was forbidden, we would meet secretly. And I transferred straight to the Faculty of Law from Belgium, so I still had the idea to study law in Pristina. Which was not a good experience for me, when I recall it, it wasn't because I wasn't welcomed, in the sense that it was Yugoslavia, it was socialism. The professors would repeatedly tell me, "You came from a country..." Belgium back then was and is a kingdom, it was democratic, so it was a liberal, capitalist country.

And of course the legal system was not the same at all. But on the other hand... so those years [of studies] weren't recognized at all, and I started from the beginning, from the first year. Of course it was a totally different educational system and another opportunity amongst colleagues, but also professors, the way of studying. And I often laugh about it because switching from Jesuits to socialists and to a socio-realist system regarding some things, for me it was a, a very big change. Of course there were consequences, but I somehow got accustomed to that as well.

There were professors, I really want to mention them now, who showed great tolerance, they were very polite. There was the late Bardhyl Çausi,⁹ who then I regrettably found out was killed by Serbs in '99. He taught Roman law and he told me, "Well, Nerimane, you passed this exam in Belgium let alone here." And it was very supportive [to me]. Fatmir Sejdiu¹⁰ was my professor and actually when I often got to meet him later for translation, I couldn't call him Mister President, but I always called him Mister Professor. And I was aware that I wasn't respecting the protocol, but for me he was really that figure, who first accepted me as well.

Imagine, I was 18-19 years old and in a completely foreign place. Foreign in the sense that I came here, but I didn't know it, I came back to family circles. Maybe many things seemed exotic to me, weddings,

⁹ Bardhyl Çausi (1936–1999), lawyer and human rights activist, held in prison during the 1999 war and killed. His remains were only found in 2005.

¹⁰ Fatmir Sejdiu (1951) is a Kosovar-Albanian politician. He was the leader of the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) and was the 1st President of the Republic of Kosovo.

outfits and such. And going 30 years back, we didn't have these, these communication devices and social media and so it was a completely unknown place [to me]. Pristina was *friendly* from the beginning, I said it in English, and I started over and there was something interesting because I remember a student got killed. We, the fellow students, asked for a moment of silence from the professor, he didn't allow it.

And it would take me back to the education on human rights that I got in Belgium, Amnesty International, I would think how I was experiencing it for real that time. Things I had read, novels I had read in Belgium, then they became reality. And I mentioned earlier that even in Presheva there was graffiti written, young people I knew were arrested, who had spoken. So, at that point I really was in the fire and I was continuously in touch with my friends, among whom was my husband today, Hazir Reka. We were a young group back then, a group of journalists, photographers, intellectuals and it was a continuation of what I had started. I wasn't there by chance, because I was known as a young writer and that continued.

And I continued with meetings, and participated in the founding of the Youth Forum, the Youth Parliament, but then I decided to never get into politics, but I chose this other path. Journalism, collaborating with foreign media; I have been collaborating with international media for 30 years, from New York Times, I started with New York Times in Podujeva's tea houses, so in '89-'90. For me it was very important that they saw what was happening with Kosovo and in Kosovo. And to transmit it to them in this way which for me was more dignified, more innocent to contribute because... this is absolutely my opinion, because I don't want to get into these waters such as Balkan politics and then politics in Kosovo.

And this explains that even in times of war I never left this environment although I had the opportunity, I have Belgian citizenship, to go to Belgium but I always wanted to follow [the situation] closely and of course maybe I even made wrong decisions about the war and other things. But that idea always followed me to be here. I always had the feeling that I should be here no matter what happens, to not see what was happening in Kosovo from afar. When I talk about Kosovo, I talk about all of it together with Presheva because... actually when you arrived I was editing a story of mine which is about the war and Presheva. So, that was the culture and education and of course I try to pass it down to my children.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned that you came back in '87, there was a very stiff atmosphere in Kosovo regarding politics, I want to know precisely how it came down to your engagement for example with New York Times, how did that link happen?

Nerimane Kamberi: So, I said in the beginning that as a young writer I began to get in touch with, at first I was interviewed by *Rilindja*, by *Zëri*. And then I did a compilation of poems that told about my time, about me coming to Kosovo and all the baggage I had. And I was mainly friends with journalists

from *Zëri*. Who today are, it's known who they are, Blerim Shala, Halil Matoshi, Hazir Reka and some others. And there came *Mladina*, the newspaper *Mladina* which already started, which was a very alternative newspaper, avant-garde in the Yugoslavia of that time, and it started in Kosovo. Because it could be felt, it was known, what was happening in former Yugoslavia was felt.

And its first address was *Zëri i Rinisë*. Of course, I mean journalists with journalists. When they came, we met with *Mladina's* journalists, with whom we are still friends. And to them I seemed like a really exceptional personality in this environment, in this place. And they said, "Let's interview you." And I said, "Excuse me but I am not the best example of a Kosovar girl, I just came here." And then they did a reportage, they came to my apartment and the way I decorated it seemed interesting to them, the books I had read.

Slovenians in general had an image of, not only Albanians, but also Albanian women, as very regressive women. As women who were stuck at home, which on one hand I confirmed myself, because then we worked with the BBC on the field and I was surprised, I can tell you about that as well. And I would deny it because I had an idea, I would say, "I'm not the image of that woman because I wasn't raised here." Even though at home, with my family, I was raised traditionally. My father, my mother had those values which they passed down to us.

But they insisted so *Mladina* had four or six pages of the interview with me, which was a lot for that time. And they wrote, "The Albanian woman who reads Marguerite Yourcenar." Marguerite Yourcenar who was one of the biggest woman writers, the first woman in the French Academy. And they actually included a poem of mine which I had written about Albanian women and that was the other image, an image of Albanian women which they wanted to show, that there's women like that in Kosovo too. Of course they did many reportages, but through me they wanted to convey a different image and when I think about it now, it was very, very good, a very good initiative and idea.

And then it's very interesting because the same journalist followed up every ten years. So, that was in '89, in '99 that journalist was, he was a correspondent with *Mladina*... because the war in Slovenia had ended, it [the magazine] turned into *Delo*. He came from Israel to follow [the situation in] Kosovo and he found some of the personalities and...

[The interview was interrupted here]

We were refugees, so we fled Pristina and we were refugees in Skopje and he found us and interviewed me. And he told me, "Nerimane, what have you done for ten years?" And I said, "I had a child," that's in the interview, "I did this, I cooked, I studied and I witnessed the fall of Yugoslavia." And he said, "What did you do, how did you manage to remain this beautiful in these difficult times?" And it's true when I look at my picture in that interview, I was very beautiful, modesty aside.

In that sense, I would then understand all the reportages which I read about women in wars, because you try to, at least for me, subconsciously show that you're alive, that you're beautiful, that life goes on, that you're a good mother, a good woman. And he related it to that, modesty aside, it's true in my eyes, the photograph shows in my eyes the desperation and it's an ocean where you can drown, both desperation about what happened and on the other hand full of hope. And that together with the title made me emotional. It's titled "Nerimane Kamberi, writer and refugee."

[The interview was interrupted here]

(Speaks tearfully) So it was something for me, both were difficult although of course with the years of studying, and the work I know that many writers went through a phase in life and wrote about it. And then the same journalist after ten years, 2008, 2008-2009, he came and interviewed me about the Independence of Kosovo, and after ten years in 2018, the tenth anniversary of Independence and interviewed me. And it's very interesting because through that interview I see Kosovo's journey along with mine or mine along with Kosovo.

This was what you asked me about, the address for the journalists who came here was *Zëri*, and *Rilindja*. And since I spoke several languages and was among that circle and that's how I began, I mean with the international media, to collaborate and work on the field. I had many experiences there, when I was arrested exactly in Trepça, a little fear, a little euphoria, a little adrenaline, all of these for which others can talk about as well, when we talked to the journalists in the field, we always had it, pain [as well] of course.

And then I made a documentary, I worked a lot on these matters, which I had to mention with the status and position of women which *Mladina* tried to show in a different light with the reportage and article they did with me. We made a long film for BBC, which treated blood reconciliations, no, sorry, revenge. And we were searching for people in the field and I was a local assistant and translator and we were looking for families where we would record.

We went to many places in Kosovo and we were in many places in Kosovo. And we were in Drenica and went to a family. The girls of that family had heard that the writer Nerimane Kamberi was there. Really for that age, I was sort of a phenomenon, in quotation marks again, they described me like that. But those girls didn't have the right to come to *oda*,¹¹ they took us to the *oda* because they considered us foreigners, there was the director Melisa Leville, an English woman. She was the English assistant and me, so it was three women and they allowed us to enter the *oda*.

But these girls weren't allowed to join but they said, "We want to meet Nerimane Kamberi." And somehow for me it didn't make sense that at that time... and then I went to greet them, at the area, at the house where the women were. And they gave me something they made by hand, it was a lace

¹¹ Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.

decoration which I still have today, as a sign of friendship with them. So, every time on this side and when we worked on the case of [blood] feud and stuff, one of the works I tried to do besides translating, I tried to play the role of a historian as well, ethnologist, anthropologist, amateurly of course.

I had to be very prepared so that [Kosovo] wouldn't always have the image of revenge and that we were a regressive nation, very hostile and stuff. Of course I didn't need to, to, to lie, reality could be seen. There were people there to explain it, there was Professor Anton Çetta¹² with whom we collaborated, who we recorded in our documentary, there was the imam of Bubaves, there was [Don Lush \[Gjergji\]](#), who were the figures or the teachers from the places we visited that explained things. But, of course, in our discussions with the team, they always had to be explained.

Of course literature also helped me with the literary references and stuff, always so that Kosovo would have the image, a realistic image. But of course not to distort it because it was what it was, the backwardness was what it was, but always explaining maybe also the reasons why we were like that. And I continued that even today, constantly when I meet [people] both as a professor and a journalist, my reportages I mean, the book I wrote as a journalist, two years ago, they speak about Kosovo, of course based on my point of view, as I see it, also how I want to tell the others.

Anita Susuri: How would foreigners understand blood feuds for example, how did they react?

Nerimane Kamberi: Look, I always say, I was fortunate to work with very professional journalists. Very professional in the sense that they always came prepared, they read a lot. But they of course had their own idea of what it was, how they thought of it. And of course the people who they met, whether Serbian, Albanian, intellectuals, farmers or others. They enriched, they deformed that image. But, again, I mean, they were journalists who read a lot and had a grasp of it.

But I worked with television a lot as well, not only on the field but also with the video editor, the film, the documentary about Kosovo, because I worked on two very big documentaries, 20 years apart. I was also in London for that, to translate the film, and then to also work with the video editor. And you know it too because you yourselves work in this field, there are several stages for the journalists, video editing... plus, the era of BBC was the golden era of journalism, and there was a huge team who came.

The best English director, the best camera person in the world, the best sound engineer in the world. There were ten of us in the team. So everything went through several links of the chain and to the video editor but always had that... And I rewatched that film two years ago at Dokufest,¹³ because I

¹² Anton Çetta (1920-1995), folklore scholar, and leader of the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds Campaign.

¹³ DokuFest is an international documentary and short film festival held annually during early August in Prizren, Kosovo. It was founded in 2002 by a group of friends. It has since grown into a cultural event that attracts international and regional artists and audiences. Films are screened throughout the eight-day festival and accompanied by programs, activities, and workshops.

always feared a bad image would be transmitted, the wrong image. Not that I tried to sugar coat it, you know to change it. But it was about wanting to show it realistically and to always understand why we were here, and why we were like that. What had happened to us, what we lacked that led us to be like that.

And I mentioned that I am a journalist at a Francophone portal [called] *Le Courrier des Balkans*, and exactly this summer we have a series of writings about the ending of Yugoslavia and it's called "The last summer of Yugoslavia '91." And from all the places where we are correspondents, we recall it and that is very important for young people. And I said I was hoping to write a book like we did earlier. I contributed to Prizren, I mean, the old city, we wrote a book because that is our history of former Yugoslavia and people will understand why it came down to that, why it came down to wars, why, what happened.

We started with an interview with president Milan Kučan,¹⁴ a Slovenian, and we will continue to the September of '91 and I will end it with Kosovo. So, the thing that has always pushed me and of course I work as a journalist myself, is the work with [other] journalists, but it's also about telling something.

Part Two

Korab Krasniqi: You said that you came back in '87, you were young, 14 years old, how old?

Nerimane Kamberi: No, in '87 I was...

Anita Susuri: 18 years old.

Nerimane Kamberi: Yes, 18 years old.

Korab Krasniqi: How did you see it, you mentioned earlier too that you went to Belgium, you grew up there, you started your education there, what kind of project was Yugoslavia to you, how did you see the idea of Yugoslavia? Although in '87 the situation began escalating a bit, how did you see Yugoslavia back then?

Nerimane Kamberi: In '87, to be precise, I was 20 years old, because of course emotions weaken our mathematical skills too. Look, for me, I felt I was an Albanian of Yugoslavia, we never had the idea [of being] an Albanian of Albania. We knew people who had the illusion of the Albania of Enver Hoxha,¹⁵

¹⁴ Milan Kučan (1941) is a Slovene politician who served as the 1st President of Slovenia from December 23, 1991 until December 22, 2002.

¹⁵ Enver Hoxha (1908-1985) was the leader of the Albanian Communist Party who ruled Albania as a dictator until his death.

like that, like paradise on earth, we didn't. We really were Albanians, we grew up on those values as I said, the Albanian flag. I know because in Presheva my family members were the first to put up the flag, I know friends who were imprisoned because of that flag.

And I often repeat it in family discussions and with friends that when I got married, Kosovo was still part of Yugoslavia in '94, but there were checkpoints and when our in-laws came from the village, from Nerodime to take me from Presheva, they took away their flag. And my husband's uncle who was a noble man, an Albanian [man] with a *plis*¹⁶ and the *bajraktar*¹⁷ of the wedding almost started fighting with the police there. They told them, "We can't take a bride without having a flag." And I always say that I connected to that idea and then of course they came to a deal, "Fold the flag, when you arrive at the house, you leave it on the bride's door, and you fold it again, like that."

But, again, so that idea of Yugoslavia as an entity, as a place where there was... I mentioned that we attended an Albanian school. We had an excursion here two times, and we stopped in Slovenia, we went to Sarajevo, to Croatia. My [maternal] uncles were in Macedonia, in Kumanovo and Macedonian was a language that I had heard. Of course, I didn't know Serbian either, but I learned [the] Cyrillic [alphabet] through graffiti, and other posters. It wasn't something we absolutely refused, but later on as an 18 year old, when I began to mature intellectually as well, I understood that Yugoslavia was an oppressive Yugoslavia.

But, at that time we were Albanians of Yugoslavia, Albanians of Presheva, et cetera, and we saw it as something positive. And then the beginning, when I returned to Kosovo and saw the complete fall, when we met Slovenes, Croatians. Actually we were in Croatia to visit our journalists at the end of Croatia [in Yugoslavia]. I remember a historian who used to say that Tudjman¹⁸ should've never come to power because Croatia would be over. So I understood how deep the situation was very late. At first I had the idea that Albanians didn't have the same rights and that we were poorer. Kosovo was more underdeveloped economically, but of course I understood it later.

Anita Susuri: In '89 there were many important historical events that happened in Kosovo and one of them was the [miners' strike](#), you said that you were engaged in that through journalism. I am interested to know all about how that happened, how do you remember that time period?

Nerimane Kamberi: It's interesting because from the moment Korab, your colleague, invited me I often attempted to recall this and maybe we dealt with this a lot less in Kosovo. It's two episodes with which Kosovo dealt less because we focused on the war. There was the matter of [blood feud](#)

¹⁶ Traditional white felt conic cap, differs from region to region, distinctively Albanian.

¹⁷ In this context, *bajraktar* refers to the person who is leading the wedding invitees while holding the national flag.

¹⁸ Franjo Tudjman (1922 – 1999) was a Croatian politician and historian. Following the country's independence from Yugoslavia, he became the first president of Croatia and served as president from 1990 until his death in 1999.

[reconciliations](#) which was a very big event, very big and of course we see the impact it had every day. And the miners' strike. And I tried to remember it, I mean my memory, and I had hundreds of students in the hall that is now called *1 tetori* [October 1st] and I held a speech and as you can see I am very emotional by nature.

But also the visit to the miners, I mean that also shows that there was a moment where we came together and that is related to, to, to the meetings, to the friendships I had with the journalists of *Zëri* and the young intellectuals of that time. And when the students began solidarizing in February, it was cold, to solidarize with the miners, of course I got in touch with the students' group and we entered the then *25 maj* [May 25th] hall. And I remember that we hung out at the time, I was close to Afrim Zhitia, who was killed by the Serbs later. And I mean the solidarity of the people to bring food to the students, because the miners were in the mine pit with us and they wanted to bring us food there.

And I was chosen, I think that... I mean I don't know now, I didn't check into it to see who made the decision for me to be there. But of course, Baton Haxhiu¹⁹ who was a student at the time was there too. I think I was chosen because again I was a figure that was different, a different personality. I was a young writer, I symbolized, there were few women writers at that time, especially young ones; that I came from abroad, that I carried enlightening values of the 18th century French philosophers. And so I was chosen in that way to go and represent the students at the Trepça mine.

Anita Susuri: You were a group, or...?

Nerimane Kamberi: No, we were a group, not a group of students, a group, I mentioned that Baton was there, it was me, I don't know, I don't remember much, I tried to find some archives. And we went there, we descended into the mine pit and I recalled from the archives but I also remember that it was very emotional, very... because they were enclosed down there for Kosovo. Let's not forget that there was various news after. We became all ears about the decisions that would be made for Kosovo and we received various news stories. So, we were actually victims of what today we would call *fake news*, false news back then. And I mean it was a very tense situation.

And then there was the risk that at any moment they could enter the hall. Imagine, we were in a closed space there where Serbs could enter to where the students were as well and arrest them en masse, and use violence. That could have happened, but still the euphoria, that adrenaline, the ideal and solidarity that we had with the miners made us take it to the very end and we constantly followed that. And to the miners I transmitted that image, the image of students who solidarized, that we were with them. And I remembered, but also recalled from the archives and I really cried then too because it was very difficult. We saw them and some of them were really in a poor condition.

¹⁹ Baton Haxhiu (1967), journalist, former editor of *Koha Ditore*, after the war editor-in-chief of the daily *Express*, owner and managing editor of Klan TV. He now works for *Euronews Albania* and is the general director of *Albanian Post*.

And when I came back, I remember that very well, I took the floor, of course again as a woman I mean, as a young writer, as a student of the University of Pristina. And I quoted, it was a quote by Anne Frank which was, “Better a terrifying end than a terror with no end.” And I gave that message to the miners we were with, who were thankful. And it really was a moment, a very great moment, very powerful. It didn’t last, that was a one week strike. I remember then being at risk, my father came to get me because he was afraid because he had seen in the news they were asking [about me]. They even said, “How is this Belgian woman among the students in the mine?” He feared for me, but I refused to leave Pristina. I didn’t have any issues then, neither faced arrest.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask you before continuing. What kind of images do you remember, if you could describe them? How do you remember it?

Nerimane Kamberi: My memory, I mentioned that I didn’t deal with that too much and even myself at this moment, because ‘99 left me more [to remember], because it’s also closer. But I have this [saying], in French it’s *une mer de jeunes*, so {opens her hands} a sea with people. All those students were sitting, I remember Afrim, maybe he stuck more than the others because he was killed after, now he’s a martyr of Llap along with that wave of people [who were killed]. And I always had the feeling that I was living it *live* [first-hand], something I had read about, for which I had signed petitions to Amnesty International. For me as a girl with Western culture of that time, Mandela was always an image. I was living it *live*, it was an apartheid for us, there was Adem Demaçi, there were these students.

Again I am saying I had the idea, the students strikes of ‘68 in Paris, which of course had a different dimension. I had fixed on those images and of course our history and then I was living it first-hand. That was it I mean... I have three moments fixed [in my mind], it’s that sea of young people, students, I remember my speech which I rightfully spoke in the mine wearing their helmets, the miners’ helmets. And I was very emotional, I cried seeing them like that. It’s those three images, it was really cold, it was February. I have these three images. And I never stopped thinking why I, I believe the reason back then was that I was known back then and many young people recognized me, many students, many...

As I mentioned those girls in the middle of Drenica, because back then we were working, I mean *Zëri* went to every place. To schools, there weren’t as many television [channels] as there are today. And there were few of us, I actually was the first to write and plus in a foreign language, in a different style, a different genre. And I had a name, I represented the Albanian students, the UP [University of Pristina] students. Western culture, I engage with journalists since back then, with writers and that’s how it went on, to all the obstacles. Because then I was also poisoned when the young people were poisoned,²⁰ I ended up in the hospital, when the young people of Kosovo were poisoned.

²⁰ In March 1990, after Kosovo schools were segregated along ethnic lines, thousands of Albanian students fell ill with symptoms of gas poisoning. No reliable investigation was conducted by the authorities, who always maintained no gas was used in Kosovo and the phenomenon must have been caused by mass hysteria. The authorities also impeded independent investigations by foreign doctors, and to this day, with the exception of a

Anita Susuri: I wanted to stop a bit here, and then we will continue there and with the blood [feud] reconciliations as well because it's in the '90s.

Nerimane Kamberi: Yes.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to talk a little more about the strike. I think you mentioned earlier something about being arrested.

Nerimane Kamberi: Yes, so I was arrested, I was interrogated, I was taken into an informative talk because I worked for a French television and we were interested, we were interested about the miners, the miners' conditions. It was '88, '89 and we went there, but at that time we had to ask for permission from the then called Ministry of Information. And of course they got it [the permission] and I didn't because they wouldn't give it away. And we went there and I said, "I will become French," I took a French name, I would speak in French and they asked, "Where is her permission document?" They said, "She doesn't have it," you know, "she forgot it at the hotel" and they didn't allow us to continue.

And the same thing happened the second day and then I had to disclose my identity as an Albanian and my name and there were Albanian and Serbian policemen and they said, "You will come down for an informative talk." And there was some kind of, I am impersonating how they were pulling me {moves side to side} they were pulling me. The journalists said, "We won't let her, she is with us! We won't let you take her to an informative talk. Ask us whatever you want." And the policemen were still pulling me, so I am impersonating {hand quotations} because not physically.

"We won't do anything to her, it's only..." and we reached a compromise, an agreement. They said, "If you interview her we will be by the door. The moment we hear something we will break the door down." So any type of physical violence, or a slap would be clearly heard because they probably thought, and it seems easy to me now but it wasn't easy. Because they said, "So you're Nerimane, yesterday you were Mary Françoise, or something French?" So that passed without physical violence. Of course I was afraid, [they wanted to know] what we were looking for, why we were looking for it. I would say, "We are interested to know what demands the miners are asking," they were living in miserable conditions.

Anita Susuri: Was that before the strike?

Nerimane Kamberi: Yes, yes, yes it was before the strike, it was before the strike.

publication in *The Lancet* that excludes poisoning, there are only contradictory conclusions on the nature and the cause of the phenomenon. For this see Julie Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1999.

Anita Susuri: Were you aware that maybe some strike was being planned although it wasn't...

Nerimane Kamberi: No, no. No, no, no, no we didn't, we didn't know.

Anita Susuri: But when the strike happened, what was your opinion, how it would end up, did you imagine anything?

Nerimane Kamberi: I mentioned it, the young people would get the news, we were students, of course, the ones of us who were representative, we would get various news that they were accepting the miners' demands, they accepted them, they tricked them. So, we had nothing concrete, we were simply decisive that we would take it till the end together with the miners. So we, not even for one minute... it wasn't our strike, it was the miners' strike which we followed, we supported.

We were solidarizing with them, but we were decisive, whatever they did we would follow and we were, we were unanimous and that was it. Of course there were older people among us who had experienced '81, and based on that we knew about the status of Albanians, of course we didn't have hopes that something really good would happen for us. But we were decisive because we knew that we would lose a lot if we let go.

[The interview was interrupted here]

Of course, the students who were more... of course, there were student organizations, of course, there were [members of the] underground movement²¹ there. *Zëri* came, now I am not saying that the organizer and I weren't in those circles at the time, but I only followed the big wave and I only thought of joining and for us all to go to the *25 Maj* hall back then. My visit... I feel sorry that I don't remember, I'm sure there are people who will explain this better than me. But of course it was the second day, the third day until the strike began, until we realized how things were developing. But [stayed] until the end, the moment the miners went out [of the mine] we dispersed as well.

Korab Krasniqi: You mentioned that you held a speech in the hall. Do you remember what you talked about, do you remember how you articulated it, what message you gave?

Nerimane Kamberi: I mentioned that it was an emotional speech but what I said was that quote by Anne Frank, because that's how I experienced it. It was really an end, in the sense, the end of the mine, it was a metaphor of what, the end of Kosovo, it would end, and it ended terribly with war but it was that idea of the mine pit and the terrible ending. And that has stuck with me and I know that a lot of people remembered it, because later for years people who saw me asked, "Are you the one who said this? I will never forget it."

²¹ Constellation of underground militant groups fighting for Kosovo separation from Yugoslavia and unification with Albania during Tito's Yugoslavia.

And who told me one day... Yes, it was one of our diplomats, I don't even know which one because I didn't ask him a lot of questions but he had asked, "Do you know Nerimane Kamberi, where is she?" Because I don't even have social media accounts, I'm not like that. "Where is she because I remember how she went to the mine and her speech." So, I am surprised that it had... of course, I spoke what I felt and what the students heard. But it was a very great privilege for me to go into the mine and meet them.

Korab Krasniqi: What kind of atmosphere did you find in the mine, who did you meet?

Nerimane Kamberi: So we met the miners who were there, in a tired state. In a state of... because they were in the dark and without food for a long time, but they also had a big mission and they didn't even know how things would go for them. I don't have specific names, but for me it's the miners, I mean, I haven't researched, maybe I didn't have the curiosity because for me each miner there symbolized [the strike]. And then, of course for me it was a relief when we saw them, when they went out of the mine and they covered their eyes {puts her hand in front of her eyes} they covered their eyes because of the light.

It was a very big moment and they... I said that I don't go a lot by images, maybe both my work and the televisions but also the writing. It's those three images, it's of the students at the 25 *maji* hall, hundreds of students. Then the events, it was the image of Bllacë²² which I remember, I mean our terror, thousands of people. And of course I didn't see those, but I created that image of thousands of people whom they pushed into the train, which remind you of other wars as well. For me that is a large number of people, great solidarity and then there was the strike we did, [the women's marches](#), [bread for Drenica](#), the candles and if we really wanted to have a key word, a *key word* [speaks in English], it's always the mass, mass, mass.

Anita Susuri: I am interested in something else regarding the strike, but I don't know if you remember now. It's the procedure before entering the mine pit, because the miners didn't accept just anybody there, but it was only the ones they chose, and they accepted you. Do you remember for example who was at the entrance, how did they welcome you?

Nerimane Kamberi: No, only that about the acceptance, they didn't accept me, they didn't accept because of course they feared that people would deceive them, manipulate them, that their strike would take a very political direction. But, for them the students, let's not forget that students always had their place, their value, always. It was in Yugoslavia as well, "Oh, students," let's not forget, not this is part of collective memory, students are the ones who gave the flambeau to Tito,²³ to Tito there,

²² Bllacë is the border crossing between Kosovo and Macedonia where thousands of refugees were stuck for a few days in March 1999, at the beginning of the NATO intervention, unable to either move into Macedonia or re-enter Kosovo.

²³ Josip Broz Tito, former President of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

students, pupils, because we were [living] in a proletarian time. It was the students, the miners, the workers. It was the socialist Yugoslavia.

But the University of Pristina was also opened very late, let's not forget, the right to education was gained very late, especially for women. And that's what I was talking about, I tried to explain it to others too, both foreigners, whether journalists, or diplomats that we gained the right to education very late. The universities where I studied [in Belgium] were hundreds of years old. So in '89, UP wasn't even 20 years old. And students held great value because with the words of that time you symbolized education, progressiveness, the light, and the miners knew that we were showing solidarity with them.

We weren't even politicians, we weren't directors of Trepça and... of course, then there were the directors, let's not forget there was [Burhan Kavaja](#) and others. We didn't represent any power, we were students who were with them and we represented the university; which was a great achievement for Kosovo in the '70s, which were actually the most calm years, but also the most progressive for Kosovo, I mean until the '74 Constitution. We had those few years, because '68, and then '81 where it started again, it was those few years in the '70s and of course they welcomed us very well. I didn't have any doubts about it.

Anita Susuri: It's logical because one of their demands was for professors, teachers to not get early retirement...

Nerimane Kamberi: Yes, yes, yes, absolutely. And of course they started that strike and all Albanians mobilized. We know that one of the consequences would be the closing down of the university and that's what happened. The university closed down, our schools closed down and so the students were actually very welcomed by the miners.

Part Three

Anita Susuri: Did you manage to graduate before it closed down?

Nerimane Kamberi: I graduated during the parallel [system].²⁴ Actually it was the last years, because as I said I started over, I started university over. But, then, of course I finished my Masters in the parallel system from Skopje to Shkodër²⁵ (laughs), from one hill of Pristina to another hill.

Anita Susuri: Can you talk to us a bit about this period?

²⁴ By 1991, after Slobodan Milošević's legislation making Serbian the official language of Kosovo and the removal of all Albanians from public service, Albanians were excluded from schools as well. The reaction of Albanians was to create a parallel system of education hosted mostly by private homes in the periphery of the city.

²⁵ The speaker mentions the distance from Skopje to Shkodër to convey that she went back and forth to attend classes in the private homes which could be far away from each other.

Nerimane Kamberi: So I was, I was a young student, I was doing my Masters and we went to Katër Llullat [neighborhood], there was an old house, where we would learn about philosophy. Now when I think about it, it's very surreal (smiles). About existential philosophy among others, at an old house which isn't there anymore. And now in the arena, what do we call it, where De Rada [restaurant] is, as they say whoever showed mercy (laughs) to leave a place, whoever gave us a place [to hold classes in].

But it was very, very effective learning, so I had Professor Rexhep Ismaili, Sabri Hamiti, Professor Metaj, Professor Stavileci, we were a small group of Master's students. I mean, it was and it wasn't a university, of course we didn't feel it, but knowledge was important, the knowledge being passed down because it wasn't important where we were because we would have wished to be in the faculty [premises], but [it was important] for the knowledge to be passed down and it was being passed down well. We would have exams and... but then it was interrupted, the war happened and I graduated.

Korab Krasniqi: Do you remember the facility where you finished school, what did it look like, how was the function of the object organized, how were classes organized?

Nerimane Kamberi: Now I have two, two parts, one part where I myself was a new assistant. At the Katër Llullat we also had an old house with a small wood-burning stove and the students. One day I found my notes [from] when I used to teach there. And in Dragodan where I taught, I mean in Arbëri, at an Albanian man's house, where you had to walk down the stairs, like students who rent apartments today, you walked down the stairs, there was a room in the back of the house. While we studied at the house at Katër Llullat as Master's students, it seems like now there is a tall building built there and it was in front of De Rada now, there is a narrow street as far as I remember, it was a one-story house and we held classes there regularly, with a regular schedule.

But learning was, when I used to teach, it was something interesting because starting your career as an academic and teaching in basements was a difficult feeling of course. And what always concerned me was for how much longer? How much longer? How long will it last? How long will this last? How long will the war last? How... something nobody knew, but it lasts long, it lasts long because it's something which I mentioned earlier, you pass it down generation to generation. This happened with your great-grandfather, it happened with your parents, it happened with you, it's happening to your child, it's endless, as I said, a terror with no end.

And that's what it's about, when would we go back to the faculty premises, to a decent place and have a... a, now of course there is the ones who assess how long it was, how much we worked, how we worked, et cetera, what was its impact, the quality, but we did our best of course. And the students had will, they would come, and now when you're free... it's always that, it's psychological when something is forbidden, when it's accompanied by a hundred risks you commit more, and when you're comfortable you let go because it's something you take for granted, with no problems.

Anita Susuri: I also wanted to ask you about...

[The interview was interrupted here]

Anita Susuri: Studying at homes, I wanted to ask you about that and then continue. About the Blood [Feud] Reconciliations, not sure if you were engaged with it or only the documentary?

Nerimane Kamberi: No, no, I don't... only the documentary, I didn't participate with the other students, with Myrvete and the others, no.

Korab Krasniqi: To continue [talking] about the war...

Anita Susuri: No, because it's the demonstrations...

Korab Krasniqi: Yes.

Anita Susuri: The ones the Women's Forum did...

Nerimane Kamberi: Yes, I always participated in those, together with the mass, but I mean not as an organizer.

Anita Susuri: Not necessarily an organizer, but to talk about the atmosphere, maybe to talk a bit about the Pristina of the '90s, the city atmosphere, political pressure, survival, culture? How did all of these connect?

[The interview was interrupted here]

Nerimane Kamberi: I forgot to mention about the students, the image I mentioned with the crowd, but on the other hand Pristina was empty. And so there were two hot points {opens her hands and puts them together} it was the hall where Kosovo was breathing in the 25 maj hall, the students, and the mines. And in those mines there was everything political, diplomatic happening, there [at the hall] were the students and Kosovo was completely silent. That feeling like in the war, nothing moved, I remember that a lot. And then I mean, then I participated in many protests, in women's movements, not as an organizer. I never wanted to and I still don't want to be part of organizational councils, as a leader of these but I only, I followed everybody else's steps.

And with the case of, as I said with the blood [feud] reconciliations, with the documentary but never as an organizer, I don't know, that is my choice. But, I always wanted to be part of them, to be there, to follow it through writings as well and also meetings with foreigners. I belong to the '90s generation, to

relate it to the fact that I was in the field a lot, but then I really was a quote {quotations gesture} adopted Pristina woman, however you want to call it. So I followed them and I have a report in my book about the coffee bars in the '90s and after the '90s.

So, I did a report of... a long writing, *Kosovo's History through coffee*, the bars. I started it with Papillon which was our bar in the '90s and then of course Kurrizi, I know that there was also a documentary made about Kurrizi. Hani i Dy Robertëve, Papilloni, these were the bars where we would go, we would meet with foreigners, they would be brought, we remade the world, the history, we would make decisions. I was there among other things, I organized, in the youth parliament which we created, I mean as a, as a party, let me not call it a party but a movement, among the first movements at the time that were coming from parties. So, they were different, they differentiated from the Communist Parties or Socialist Parties of that time.

And Pristina, it's interesting when I came to live here I said I will never love this place, because that was my idea. And then of course you fall in love with a place where you live and especially when you experience this many things whether they're good or bad. And I was still part of the group of journalists, young intellectuals, we would gather in houses. Of course we experienced the curfews together, the arrest of our friends, the killings of our friends. And so they were very difficult years, very dynamic years, for us, very euphoric as well because we would do stuff. We had the feeling that we were really contributing to Kosovo and each of us contributed in their own way.

Anita Susuri: In the '90s I wanted to stop a bit at the demonstrations you mentioned and there were the marches, the march holding bread loaves...

Nerimane Kamberi: Yes, the bread march.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember that day, how did it go?

Nerimane Kamberi: I remember the bread march... I'm sorry, I'm sometimes confused by the photo images of Hazir [Reka] because there are photographs with bread loaves {raises her hand} and of course that at some point there is a mixture of my memories and his photographs. Of course, and I always have that image of those women and it's good that it's being continuously treated and their protests and their contribution, because they were really decisive and had no fear at any moment.

Let's not forget that we always had policemen in front of us, armed military and let's not forget that we had a history of Kosovo behind. Especially when Croatia and Bosnia happened after, everything was expected. But these, these women I mean were really, were really fearless, they were decisive and... again their walk, those leaders, let's say those pioneers, I will use a stronger word. The pioneers and the crowd, always the moment they called, you always had the others behind you.

Anita Susuri: You probably remember that you reached a point and then you were stopped by the police?

Nerimane Kamberi: Yes, yes. I remember that we would discuss, I mean the pioneers were always trying to negotiate with the police. But there was no violence used back then, fortunately there wasn't.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned these cultural activities that were happening, for example at the Hani i Dy Robertëve, Papilloni, and Kurrizi, can you tell us anything more specific for example? There were exhibitions there I think?

Nerimane Kamberi: Yes, yes, but also, I mentioned in my report, but also a few weeks ago I attended the promotion of the book made by the owners of Hani i Dy Robertëve which is really a memory of ours, I mean for the ones of us who were around those circles of journalists, of artists. We were a group that knew each other, translators. At that time I also worked for the Information Center of Kosovo. So at the Democratic League, where the Democratic League of Kosovo²⁶ was founded and I was there as a translator of French news. So, we were a group that knew each other. And of course I was there too in the beginning of the Democratic League of Kosovo. And we were almost always the same figures, the same people, we were a little younger, the intellectuals of that time, the artists, Agim Çavdarbasha, there was Nekra who did caricatures.

So we were a group, a group of artists, translators, journalists and Hani i Dy Robertëve and Papilloni were places... But especially Hani remains a place of diplomatic, journalistic movements, a piece of the Balkans with a vision towards the West, with a call, an SOS to the West. And these places, back then there were fewer places like that of course, it was also dangerous because the police could enter at any moment, they could arrest you, they could beat someone up. For example the case when the actor Adriana [Abdallahu] was killed, and we were invited to be part of the opening of... so at Santea because we also live there close to Santea. And we didn't go that night, fortunately, we had the invitation and the murder happened. I mean, it was...

Anita Susuri: What year was it?

Nerimane Kamberi: *Mon Dieu* [Fr.: My god]...

Anita Susuri: A little before the war?

Nerimane Kamberi: It was a little before the war. Anyway I projected later now, but I want to say that the '90s, especially '97, '98 when we began to work in the field too there was always a contrast,

²⁶ Alb. *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* - Democratic League of Kosovo. The first political party of Kosovo, founded in 1989, when the autonomy of Kosovo was revoked, by a group of journalists and intellectuals. The LDK quickly became a party-state, gathering all Albanians, and remained the only party until 1999.

because we would be in Drenica, in Rahovec, in Suhareka where there was only conflicts, where UÇK²⁷ was, where people were fighting, where there were displaced people, in the mountains of Berisha, in Pagarusha et cetera. And then when we came back to Pristina it was a different reality from what could be seen. It was an abnormal normality, if I can call it that. We were in the field the whole time seeing the terror, seeing the war actually and Pristina was trying to live a somewhat normal life.

Anita Susuri: You said that it happened several times that you went to rural places as a journalist, what were the things that maybe left an impression on you positively or negatively?

Nerimane Kamberi: Yes, I mean, ever since the time that I explained that episode of... so during the blood [feud] reconciliations, it made me understand a lot of things which we maybe didn't think about. I remember that with a family, I think in the Municipality of Suhareka, the women would plead to me, they would plead to me because I spoke Albanian, I was the one they could communicate with easier. They would say, "Do anything you can so they will reconcile, so this blood will be forgiven." Because they had become the backbone, they had unintentionally become the backbone of their families, at a time when everything functioned through the men.

So these women mainly didn't have an education, and then they had to do everything which is normal for us today, somewhat. Back then, from the simplest thing to driving the tractor, because the lands were left [unworked]. The men were either confined, or they were... I mean confined at home or confined in prison. And so there was working the land, administrative work, as much as there were, shopping. So, they were women who were at once put as heads of the family, to lead the family. And in those families they didn't have... they had the role of giving birth to children, raising children, making food, but they didn't have other duties. And I remember they were really calling on that, as a plea, "Please do anything you can for them to really reconcile." And I mean maybe history left these women in the shadows from the beginning.

Whether the role they had in war, let's not talk about what they faced later, but also the role they had. The men either joined UÇK, who fought or they hid and the women were actually left alone and they were left alone to look after, to look after... To take care of the elders, to take care of the children, the house and always in danger. So, ever since the time of the blood [feud] reconciliations. Of course even from earlier in the field, because of course we were very uneducated as women. We had very few leading roles, first of all at home, where the roles were divided, sociologists explain this very well. But I also experienced them myself, I mean.

But of course in these extreme situations, situations like the blood [feud] reconciliations. And then it's very understandable that there were girls even in the reconciliations movement and let's not forget on the other hand there were women who were political prisoners, who were leading in '81, and then

²⁷ Alb. *Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës* - Kosovo Liberation Army, was an Albanian guerrilla paramilitary organization that sought the separation of Kosovo from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbia during the 1990s.

leading the blood [feud] reconciliations. And it's very normal that they came out then, but on the other hand they came out because they were brave from the beginning, they were pioneers, but on the other hand [also] because their figure was accepted easier because they were imprisoned. I mean, they had a name which society accepted much easier.

And so when I saw it at the reconciliation [campaign], because as I said I knew Kosovo very little. I was from Presheva, I mainly came to [visit] family circles. I didn't know the rural areas, the *oda* parts, with a lot of respect for everyone of course but again the work in the field and meeting people made me understand these much better. And [when it came to] the blood [feud] reconciliations, so the side when a woman had to forgive was much bigger because until then the women weren't asked at all if they agreed or not, but actually their son could have been killed. Now let's not forget the mother-child dimension... For example, in the case of when I did the documentary, her child was killed, but she was like every other family member and of course her husband didn't ask her if they should forgive or not. Their own opinion, because that's what it was structured like.

And of course the '90s afterwards, all the protests we did in the street and whether women were students, because your status still gave you a different value. And whoever the women were, intellectual women, women who were professors in UP, so the pioneers, but then also all the other women, women from the village, women with no education, with education, they all became the same around one cause, one ideal. And this is good that in recent years it's been highlighted more and more because it's been forgotten, the role of women was forgotten, their position was forgotten.

As I said, in the war too, I met a girl who was raped in the war and [she had] the feeling of abandonment, "They left us." I mean, in the sense that they were left in the hands of the Serbs, in the hands of the Serbs. So, their fathers left them, their husbands left them, their brothers left them. Those who until that time were the ones protecting them, protecting their honor, protecting their name and they vanished at once. And so this girl had ended up as a sexual slave with no protection and this is of course a different debate, it was surely talked about less, one of these reasons.

And then, the other thing, a documentary we did at the Bogujevci family, of the MP [Saranda](#), that was one of the most difficult for me because we did it immediately in '99. And there was the whole family, because there was the idea that nothing happens in the city, they don't touch the women, like a Second World War idea. And [they thought] it would be a war between men and so the women and elders were left and the worst happened. I mean, there were wrong ideas that only men would fall victims and unfortunately we have the example of Bosnia which was more recent, which was known, but I am not retelling history, there are people who are more able for this.

So women had it difficult at every moment, at every moment. They had husbands but in the sense that, of course the family pyramid was taken down at one point, it wasn't the elder, the man, the one who led anymore, I mean I saw it from the blood [feud] reconciliations, and then of course until the

war. I tried even in my reports, although that wasn't always my only focus, but to show that role and... because there was a state in '99 that I recall and hope God doesn't let another war happen again, we are in a different situation, a different mentality.

That time found us poor, found us uneducated, it found women in many roles we didn't have until then. To the point where they maybe didn't even go outside their village, and suddenly they had to go around Kosovo from one edge to the other, and they had children, and many different risks. It was war, there is no other way to explain it.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned that you fled during the war, but I want to know how that happened and what was the moment when you decided, how did you decide?

Nerimane Kamberi: I said that we, both men and women have worked a lot in the field, we put ourselves at risk often, the mines, the arrests, the interrogations and we of course saw the terror throughout Kosovo. So, I was a humanitarian and in '98 I worked for the Doctors without Borders where I was responsible for human rights, Human rights officer. And so... and I explained to my students because there is a French theatrical play which takes the ancient theme but it talks about the Second War in France and the whole dialogue is about whether the war was going to happen or not, the decisions that would be made. And we watched it there, so what was happening in Rambuje. And of course that nobody wanted war and it happened.

So it was decided that it would start, the bombings would start and we, at the Doctors without Borders, they told us, "Whoever wants to can come with us." Because the organizations received the order to flee from Kosovo and so I told my sister, who was unmarried. I told her, "You are alone, you make the decision for yourself, you flee." And the day before I took my son who was four years old, I took him away and sent him to my parents in Presheva. I thought that he would have it better there and Serbs ripped my ID card. So, I couldn't return here. Very difficult because during war it was very difficult to make decisions. It's always hard in life to make big decisions, but in those circumstances it was very difficult. But there was the decision that I was returning to Kosovo anyway.

Hazir, my husband, was working for the Reuters agency, he was a photographer and they of course knew him from [his work in] the field and he thought we should flee from the beginning. I... and I think it was a really wrong decision of mine for not leaving. I had the idea, I felt like a traitor. Again, [it was] the idea I had from my youth that I should be there. And we thought of staying. Our child, our son, was safe. And we would gather with friends, it was very interesting because sometimes there were comic moments in all this tragedy. We would gather with our neighbors and a journalist from France called me and said, "Neriman" he said... the phones worked back then, and he said, "we can see that the NATO planes are taking off from Aviano, what is the atmosphere like in Pristina." And I described it and in that moment the sirens started going off.

And it was an experience straight from the movies, I had only heard war sirens in movies. And when I told him that... he could hear the sirens too and he hung up the phone (smiles). It was a very terrible feeling. And we would gather at our neighbors and they had sent their wives and children away, I was the only one with the lady of the house, so the mother of those two brothers. And I wasn't afraid, I want to say that in '98 I was really afraid. When the Jashari family was killed,²⁸ when I fell into a mental state that I was so afraid I didn't even take my child to daycare, I would sleep with the lights on. It was a fear which I couldn't control, I couldn't defeat it, I was afraid to even go to stores.

And I had an invitation to represent Kosovo at a conference in Paris, in June and when I went there, I saw how beautiful life was, how beautiful I was, I had a floral dress... and I was healed. I came back to Kosovo. So, I never was afraid anymore; which on one hand is stupid because you should be afraid in war. But I remember my sister lived in Arbëri [neighborhood in Pristina], in Dragodan and the phones were working, I told her, "I'm coming to see you." And she said, "You have either gone mad, or you're taking drugs," she said, "we are in a state of war." And maybe I also rejected it in my subconscious.

But there really were Serbian tanks near Santea, and in my building there were... because there were these three story buildings, I had Serbian neighbors. And when they bombed the cantonment which is now called Adem Jashari, it was really close, but I was asleep. And a journalist called me and my husband answered. He said, "A journalist is calling for you." And he said, "Neriman," he said, "the main cantonment of Pristina was bombed," and when I told him, "Excuse me, I was asleep." He couldn't imagine and even I can't imagine now, because it was really close to me. But, maybe that big fear in my subconscious and I didn't hear it. He said, "Your city is being bombed, you are sleeping" (laughs).

He couldn't imagine, even I can't imagine now, but it was like that. And it already began, we went out in Kurriz to buy whatever was left to buy. We wanted to get bread and they told us at the bakery, "Go away, go home," they said, "because a Serb was killed just now, the problems," they said, "already began." We went back, and I was watching my Serbian neighbors out the window, they would hit the Albanians, whoever had bags of... that they bought something, they would shoot it [out of their hands]. And every moment started becoming dangerous. Fortunately, the radio was working, we heard that Bajram Kelmendi²⁹ and his sons were taken.

I knew them because I was, now I'm going back to my story, I was a member of the Council for Human Rights, in '91 I went to the US with *bac*³⁰ Adem Demaçi, with a delegation to tell them what was happening in Kosovo. We met with Bob Dole. We were in Amnesty International in the New York Times,

²⁸ The massacre of the entire family of the Jashari in Prekaz, Drenica, March 5, 1998 marks the beginning of the Kosovo war.

²⁹ Bajram Kelmendi (1937-1999) was a lawyer and human rights activist. He filed charges against Slobodan Milošević at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in 1998. On the first day of the NATO war in 1999, Serb police arrested him with his two children Kastriot and Kushtrim. Their bodies were found the next day.

³⁰ *Bac*, literally uncle, is an endearing and respectful term for an older person.

we did a trip to raise awareness, to inform them about what was happening. Hazir was part of the delegation with photographs of the ones killed, the ones arrested. And he followed *bac* Adem, who had just been released from prison. And there were obstacles because we went to Vienna and they didn't give *bac* Adem the visa, and then they gave it to him in London. Of course we were with him and his stories the whole time.

And as part of the Council for Human Rights, I mean we worked together about human rights. And so, also as part of the humanitarian work I did with Doctors without Borders, I did reports on what happened in the field in the areas we observed, that we watched over. And so those days we already started knowing that it was time to flee. At home in the apartment we were hiding we would put, back then there were these radiators {opens up her hands} that weighed hundreds of kilograms, so our cabinets wouldn't be broken. And then we found out after the war that there were Serbs at the rooftop because we found the weapons, and the bags of... because they observed Dardania [neighborhood in Pristina] the whole time and our street at Santea.

[The interview was interrupted here]

So, every moment started to become dangerous and last week I published... because for the 20th anniversary of the war of Kosovo I did three reports for the newspaper *Le courrier des Balkans*, the portal. And one of them is about our time as refugees in Macedonia. And we decided with our neighbors, because our car wasn't working, to leave, we thought of going through Gračanica to Gjiilan. The paramilitaries stopped us, they didn't let us [through], we returned and that's where it was, "Are we returning to our apartment or are we leaving for Skopje?" And we decided [to go] to Skopje and the paramilitaries stopped, we gave them 500 *marka*³¹ and we crossed to Macedonia. Fortunately, it was before the terror in Bllacë when we left.

And my husband's colleagues from Reuters welcomed us, who felt really sorry. Of course that somehow they had left us in Pristina. And that was another comic and painful moment when they took us and sent us to a hotel but there were no more rooms in the hotel. At the Continental Hotel, because that's where all the journalists, and all the foreign delegations were, the only [vacant] room was the suite. So we had a suite, but we didn't have a house anymore (cries). And... so we hugged, we started crying that we were alive and we started the refugee life in Macedonia.

I am saying I could've gone to Belgium, because I was Belgian [citizenship wise], but I wanted to be close, near Kosovo and to continue the small contribution I could give. And we stayed, I mean, fortunately we didn't live in a camp because we arrived at the right time, we rented a house. And it was

³¹ Albanian: *Marka*; German: *Deutsche Mark* was the basic monetary unit of West Germany from 1948 to 1990 and of reunited Germany from 1990 to 2001. It was used as a stable, non-official currency in various Yugoslav republics as a result of hyper-inflation of the *dinar*.

very interesting because I was working with Doctors Without Borders, I mean I was in Bllacë, mainly working in Bllacë and then I worked in the neutral zone *no man's land* [speaks in English].

There where we had the right to go as an organization {extends hands} to receive people who were wounded, who had it worse. And there I waited for Fehmi Agani's³² family, I recorded their testimonies, the first case, the first person whom I met. And then we had the first war prisoners, who were released, 36 men were brought by bus to the border. The physician checked on them, they were in a very bad condition because of the torture. I recorded the testimonies, I wrote them down. Of course, I always reported to Paris, about what they were doing.

Anita Susuri: Were those [war] prisoners Serbian?

Nerimane Kamberi: Not them, they were war prisoners, they were caught in the column, wherever they were, each of them had a story. Then they were beaten up, they were imprisoned and were surprisingly released. And what was interesting is that Doctors without Borders came for reinforcement and there was no more room in the house we were renting, so I rented it out to them (laughs). I said that even in war you will always find a way. They didn't know that I was a refugee and they said, "Rent is a little expensive," I said, "I don't know how long this war will last, I need money." And then they felt sorry, I said, "I am a refugee," I said, "maybe war will last long and I need money." That was the comic side, but I thought I was proficient, to do something.

So, I mean we stayed for three months, we did reports, Hazir took photographs. There was an old woman who was found by her family members, I spoke about it in the report... (tears up) Her children... they were living somewhere in Scandinavia, Sweden or Norway, they found their mother through the photographs of Hazir and they found it in the Reuters agency, they found the photograph, they called us at home. And the next day we went to the camp to search for her based on the photograph, but they had taken her to Turkey, they used to send people with humanitarian transfer. And at first there were no... at the camp in Stankovec, let alone Bllacë, but there were no phones in Stankovec, there weren't.

So, I said, there were people who stopped me, because I had the humanitarian vest, they would give me numbers, they would tell me, "Call this person, this girl, this boy, tell them I am alive, that I am well, that I am here." And when I went back home there at the Doctors without Borders, at the office, I would grab the phone and call them around the world. And they would say... you know I received different reactions, someone would scream, someone would give well wishes, someone would cry, on the phone, it was very difficult. And then the conditions improved a little for them, I mainly worked in Bllacë and in Stankovec. It's interesting because even when the portal asked me to do it two years ago,

³² Fehmi Agani (1932 - 1999) was a sociologist and politician in Kosovo who was considered to be the leading thinker and political strategist of the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) in the 1990s. He represented the LDK in international negotiations prior to the 1998–1999 Kosovo War, but was murdered during the war.

it was very difficult for me to accept this story, and then I did it. It was difficult for me to reread it, it was difficult to submit it, but it's good that I did because of course there is something from that time left.

Although, very difficult (tears up), I mean when I think about where I was and where I came from and what I experienced personally. It's very interesting because at the Doctors without Boundaries we had a collaboration, a partnership with the International Federation of Human Rights in Paris and a woman came, she was a lawyer, she dealt with the refugees in Albania. And she said, "I asked a refugee what they wanted to tell?" But, she said, "Nothing happened to me." She said, "Sir, how did you come here?" "Well," he said, "they kicked me out of my home," "but isn't that." That idea we have that the worst should happen, but it was enough that you left your house because that is a basic right of yours.

This is where I, I draw the line that I was raised with those enlightening ideas, the human rights declarations that we have the right to education, to a home, to a dignified life. And I ended up seeing them, it was something that [I didn't think] would become a reality and was happening to me, I never thought of it of course. I mean, kind of like a, like a saying, never think that the worst cannot happen to you, even if it's the worst, war. Because really when I came back from Belgium here, the war was happening somewhere away or at a different time, it was the Second World War that they had experienced, I mean grandparents and great-grandparents, my parents were little, whether in time or in distance.

I mean, war was happening in Africa, in Asia, but the war in Europe that I would experience myself and I mean from my return, all of this ended fortunately and I didn't experience a loss in my family, I found my son, I don't want to... (tears up).

Part Four

Anita Susuri: How did you receive the news that it [the country] was liberated, the NATO forces entered in Kosovo? Where were you and how did you receive this news?

Narimane Kamberi: I was in Skopje, and of course we constantly watched the news. A delta which is not, it's not, I didn't hear it but my son... because my father-in-law came from Germany, bless him, and he would look at my son and always waiting for news, when he came from Ferizaj, he got out. And in the report I said it, and as soon as somebody from Ferizaj arrived he would buy them tea pots (smiles), tea and he would come to the camp entrance, he would call me to bring it to them, to receive news.

And he watched my son, and it was very interesting because my son befriended another boy who was a refugee across the road, he was from Kaçanik. And my son started speaking in a Kaçanik accent (smiles). He turned four during the war, we celebrated his birthday there, because it was in May. And he said, my father-in-law told me, and... that during that night when it was signed, the night it was

going to be signed, he [my son] was playing, the war, he threw a stick I think, he said, "Grandpa, the war is over." And... grandpa he said, "Grandpa, the war is over." And he thought of it as something, [he had] a feeling. But, of course we followed all of it [news].

How I received it, of course, that it was very big news, but I also really feared what we were going to find. Because I worked in camps for three months. And my sister worked in the Kukës camps...

[The interview was interrupted here]

My sister was working, meaning the one I told you fled Kosovo and went to Skopje, and after the big crisis began in Kukës, they suggested that she would be transferred to Kukës. And she... they gave both of us time off, and she transferred from Kukës to Tirana by helicopter, because the travel conditions were very difficult, and I went to Albania. It was the first time I went to Albania and I never wanted for my first time in Albania, which of course we all wanted to visit, to happen under those circumstances.

And... but yes I met my sister in Tirana. But she wouldn't speak, she never... I think I stayed for a couple of days and I remember the house they were renting, there was the front yard which reminded me of the front yard of our house in Presheva. It rained like it did in Presheva. And... but during the whole time she (tears up), and then I found out she was taking sedatives because of what she saw there. And among others, so, she met the Berisha family survivors from Suhareka, Shyrete {wipes nose} and...

So, I mean from what she told me, it was terrible, but [she] never, even today she doesn't speak about what happened there, what she witnessed. And what I saw for three months there, the stories, the testimonies, seeing your friends, your neighbors behind wires... I remember a woman, she came with a child, she had hit him in the nose, [there was] blood, I asked, "What happened?" She said, "I hit him because he's asking for food." "Well," I said, "you're not in the forest anymore. There is plenty of food." I took him, there was that organization that would give food, I took him there.

So, I mean I didn't experience liberation with great joy at that moment. First, we had left our house, so I didn't know if we would find it, in what state we would find it. I immediately started thinking negatively, although it's not in my nature, but of course that it was moments like that, what we would find, what... of course, that Bosnia was an experience, my work... experience, I mean what I heard because I wasn't there. What I saw, my experience, my life, as I said from the '80s, I was in the Council for Human Rights myself, I was poisoned, the protests and stuff.

And... there was a, something finished, what I said... but not yet, I had the idea that that endless terror ended, for which I mentioned I had the feeling it would never end. And... but I wasn't very {pauses}

euphoric to say, “Here, freedom came.” Not at all. And Hazir came immediately, my husband, with the Reuters team. I came after two or three days I think. It was like that.

Anita Susuri: How did you go back to normality after? Was it difficult?

Narimane Kamberi: I went back to normality because I mean, there was a lot to be done, there was... what stuck with me was the greeting we always did, “Is it all of you?” When we would meet in the street, that’s my first memory after coming back, “Is it all of you?” And... but then there was a lot, a lot of work, we had a lot of work, journalists would come, then I had to finish my Masters. There was a great dynamism, there was the return, so many people that thought it would become good in Kosovo immediately, and they returned. Rebuilding, the work in the field, the balance.

In ‘98, I mean the first reports in June... because it reminded me of a song by Leonard Cohen which goes, “How do you think they can look like?” Because I went to the Mitrovica Prison where the suspects for war crimes were arrested, two Serbs and three Roma people. And I was with a French lawyer and we were going to meet them and do a report. And as soon as I entered I said, “Are you sure that I have to speak to them?” He said, “Yes.” “Even to give a,” I said, “handshake?” He said, “Yes.”

And... I mean... of course it’s ethics, ethics, it’s a matter of courtesy, but I had the feeling, can I be nice to monsters? To people who had forced me to run away, to leave my house, to leave children. And... but of course, I finished the job the way I should have after. And somebody said... these are really my first memories. A general, or a French person, told us, “Go back through Drenica and you will smell the scent of death.” It was a hot summer because even spring in Macedonia was hot. And we came back through that road, of course, I mean the mass graves, the smell of death was everywhere in Kosovo.

So, there were no feeling of happiness, and plus when I went to my apartment I asked for KFOR³³ to go in with us because I was afraid of traps, I mean *booby traps* [speaks in English]. I knew from my work in the field that there were people who lost limbs because of these traps. They didn’t have time to deal with us, plus we were in a neighborhood, I mean in Dardania, it was mixed, where there were still Serbs. And I remember [seeing] from my balcony the tanks who were protecting the last Serbs who were there. So everything I opened I would take a breath {takes a deep breath} if a *booby trap* would go off.

We found out from an old woman, because we also could tell, that two Serbs stayed at our place, two Serbs, seemingly young, and they had washed their civilian clothes, apparently they ran away quickly. And of course we collected the things we found, and then in the attic also, we sent them... I don’t know whom we gave it to, to UNMIK I think. Yes, we opened everything, we found all of Hazir’s

³³ The Kosovo Force is a NATO-led international peacekeeping force in Kosovo. KFOR entered Kosovo on June 11, 1999, two days after the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1244.

photographs, but he explains this better, they were all around. And they had set apart Fehmi Agani's picture, so even here.

But then life picked up its speed, the dynamism, work, work. Our house in the village was burned down in '98, because the village where... where Hazir comes from, Nerodime, it was a village with Serbs, it was burned down in '98. In '98, the first migrations from our family were in '98. There were many episodes because they fled Ferizaj, a part of them lived in Ferizaj and a part of our family attempted to flee to Germany through connections. I was in a summer university about human rights during that summer and I came and took my sister-in-law's son, who was the same age as my son, but at the time passports didn't have a photograph, I took him to Germany as my son, I got him on a plane.

And we, it was interesting because in '99 after the war I traveled abroad, for a conference in Paris again and in the Skopje airport they wouldn't let me fly with my son, they would say, "His documents," you know, "they're false documents." I said, "You, Sir, I took someone else's child with these documents once." I got really brave (laughs) now it doesn't make sense, but there were no facts, there was nothing he could do. I said, "I took someone else's child, now I will take my own with no problems because everything is fine." I mean to say that we were ready to do anything to help each other survive. And our house here was completely burned down, my late father-in-law rebuilt it.

And I continued my work, both in the university, and with the journalists, and... because as I said I studied law and here I continued [studying] law. And maybe the only moment which was a little euphoric is that, "Haha {onomatopoeia}, I will finish university." Because I hadn't finished only a few law exams. I enrolled for a semester and I never finished it. But I constantly worked in the law field with Lawyers without Borders, notary, et cetera. And so I followed from far and near Kosovo after the war.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to talk about one more part, because I think it's very important, about the student poisonings, if you could tell us your experience, what you lived through?

Narimane Kamberi: Yes, I mean at the time I wasn't a student because as you know it mainly happened in school, in... I was on my way to *Rilindja*, I mean to my friends at *Zëri*. And in front of the door at *Rilindja*, I passed o... I mean, those spasms began, those... and I passed out. And the *Rilindja* workers took me, at that moment I remember that I was jumping like this {moves her body}. And they took me to the hospital. I lost my sight, I mean temporarily because of the poison's effect. Zekerija Cana³⁴ came to visit, who at the time was I think head of Human Rights, there was Veton Surroi.³⁵ I have photographs from that time.

³⁴ Zekerija Cana (1934-2009), historian. Member of the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms, also leader of the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds Campaign.

³⁵ Veton Surroi is a Kosovo Albanian publicist, politician and former journalist. Surroi is the founder and former leader of the ORA political party, and was a member of the Kosovo assembly from 2004 to 2008.

They tried to place us wherever they could, because there was no room, not enough room because we were too many, too many. And I stayed there for... two, three days I think and I went back home.

Anita Susuri: The poisoning happened as a kind of...

Narimane Kamberi: Yes... the poisonings, I mean there were studies conducted, there was even a documentary about it, there was also Bernard Kouchner³⁶ at the time who dealt with the matter of poisonings. Now whether it was from air, he tried to [figure it out] because there many things left unclear about the poisoning. Because really the Serbian version was that it was a collective hysteria, it was children, all... because it was mostly students and young people affected, that it was a collective hysteria. But it was definitely proven that it was poisoning.

Now, earlier the information was clearer to me, because there was doctor Luci, who at the time dealt with it, she was in the hospital at that time. And, whether it was a high degree of poisoning, or it was only to scare them and not kill them, I don't know, I don't know. But I know that even myself, I also have photographs, that I had a few labels, the returned, the poisoned, refugee. But especially as a witness and observer, like many other people, so not anything special on my side.

But, the good thing that helped me is writing. Unfortunately, not yet in a literary way, I can't, it's not time, but through reports and I speak about... and especially those three reports that I did after, for the 20th anniversary. Actually, a friend of mine, who I took as a subject for the liberation of Pristina, said, "Thank you because I had forgotten many things." I am noticing that even I myself [forgot things], many things, whether intentionally, or not intentionally, of course it's age too and maybe we have many things in our memory. That helps me a bit to... I wrote two poems, one for my son before the war, one for the other who was born after the war.

So, I found a way which still isn't the one I mean, but I want to say that we have worked too little on it and there's a lot more, and it's normal. I mentioned that I continuously follow the Francophone world and I follow writers who still or never managed to speak about what they experienced during the war, during, during Nazism and stuff. But we worked too little and... on ourselves, on others. The events, the non-stable situation, rebuilding the soul, rebuilding the country, it didn't leave us enough time to work on ourselves, we didn't have much help in that aspect and the consequences can be seen today of course.

And that is normal, it's not something specific to Kosovo, a post-conflict place always has consequences. For example, the matter of rapes, we knew very early on, the ones who worked in the field, that they happened although only a few spoke out. I remember in the camp there was a French

³⁶ Kouchner (1939-) is a physician and politician, the founder of Médecins sans Frontières. While he was France's Health Minister, Kouchner had made a statement recognizing that Albanian students in Kosovo had been poisoned. After the war, in 1999, Kouchner was appointed the UN Special Representative in Kosovo.

journalist, “Did you meet raped women?” Because they knew from Bosnia. And we dealt with this matter very late, because we didn’t want to, because they didn’t want to, there’s different factors.

But anyhow even what you are doing, which should not be forgotten and... because now more than before, because now we are in a... I see it with children and my students, we are at a time when we are bombed, we have an overdose of information, quick news, a lot of it and we don’t have time, and we don’t want to deal with things from the past. I remember that during the [covid] lockdown we stayed here, in this house with my children and of course that we would bring back some topics and they didn’t want to hear them or they would say, “Oh, we didn’t know.” When I say that my children don’t know, then what can be expected of others.

But now it’s even more difficult to work with this collective memory because we don’t have the time, this hard disc of ours {raises her hand to her head} is very loaded with good news, useless, with a lot of information. And the fact that we are bringing this stuff back... I am saying, writing, because I said in the beginning too that I wrote since I was really young, and I continue to write. I have recently finished the book with stories about the pandemic and... but I can see that from time to time war comes back there too. And writing is what helped me. And now I am hoping because I don’t believe people find any way to overcome these, to forget, they can’t be forgotten, but at least make them softer.

Anita Susuri: Mrs. Nerimane, if you want to add something, or something we haven’t asked and you would want [to tell], maybe we didn’t touch upon a subject that you would like to add in the end?

Narimane Kamberi: Well, of course, something is always left unsaid, anyway, first I... I won’t apologize because emotions are evident in cases like this and I always say that... because I sometimes make people uncomfortable too, I see it with foreigners too when I explain, but it’s... so for a stable environment to be created as soon as possible, a place when you can live a dignified life even though there is absolutely no ideal [place], and we overcome these as easy as possible, these sufferings, and it’s easier to deal with our history in a more scientific way.

[The interview was interrupted here]

So, after the war, of course, we needed to create a dignified place, an environment, a stable place to live as quickly as possible, although it is quite difficult and takes time. Because a painful past and a troubled present do not help to heal a nation. And a people who have not spiritually recovered from all this past that we have had for generations, not only us who have experienced it, then it is not the place... although I say again, from what I have read, from the culture I have, many, many debates, France is still dealing with the Algerian war, the Germans are dealing with something... what we refused [to deal with] always comes back later, what we refused to face or did not know. And so it was painful.

Of course, I never had any illusions that Kosovo would be a paradise, as some people I know thought, “We came back, we had a good time in Germany, in Canada, but we are coming back to Kosovo.” I always remember a neighbor here from the village, who said, “My husband brought me back, and what am I doing here now?” I am protecting the river.” She said, “I was doing good there.” That idea. So, that’s a lot, a lot... even today young people are leaving, we ran away a lot, to get out... so, now I would like to protest for something useless, not for bigger things.

Of course, our generation should now explain, to show the young people, of course we also had exciting moments because I don't want to make everything dark now. But of course it wasn't easy. But many of our processes happened much later. Now I'm not going to point the finger at anyone, to accuse, because that's not my purpose, and that's not the point. But as a small place, some processes happened much later and today you can see it, and in the spiritual state, when you see the economic and psychological reports from Kosovo, these are the consequences of everything we did.

I'm also glad that I'm a woman in this case, and I've always said, “It's good that I'm...” So, I've never had a problem with that issue, but let's at least raise our voice... our voice, as I said before, with roles that society and history assign us, roles that society once took from us suddenly, without our will, forcibly, in a way... they gave us family leadership, we succeeded, not without consequences, but we succeeded very well. Very good where we were, and where we are now, and this is positive. But now of course there is a very banal saying, but there is a lot to be done.

Anita Susuri: Thanks a lot for your story, Mrs. Nerimane.

Narimane Kamberi: Thank you.