

Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH AVNI MUSTAFA

Pristina | Date: April 4, 2025

Duration: 42 minutes

Present:

1. Avni Mustafa (Speaker)
2. Alisan Skenderi (Interviewer)

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.

****The film of this interview is corrupt, but we decided to publish the transcript, keeping its oral/conversational style, because of the unique perspective on the experience of the war that it conveys. The interview was conducted in English.***

Alisan Skenderi: Hello, today is the 4th of April of 2025 and I'm currently in Pristina with my dear friend Avni Mustafa who will give an interview on his experience about the '99 war when he was a child, how he overcame it, and how he came to where he is (smiles) {nods}. Avni, can you please start by telling us where you grew up and what was your childhood like?

Avni Mustafa: Thank you, Alisan, thank you sir (smiles) {leans forward to the microphone}. One-two, one-two...(light chuckle). No, it's always challenging talking about my childhood or the childhood of anyone who was a child back in 1999 (sighs) {shakes head}. That was not what you may call a childhood because we had to grow up fast and this was due to the conflict that we had and the situation, I must say, that we were facing. The majority of people are saying that in 1999 we had a conflict, or we had a war, and the war started in 1999 but no, I have to disagree with that {firm tone, slight pause}. The war, in the place where I grew up and where I lived all my life, which is Plemetina, 11 kilometers from Pristina, started in 1998, and the first attacks happened in Plemetina, the place where I live.

Before telling you stories about that, about the conflict and also my journey, how I grew up, I really want to emphasize and share a couple of things that I believe you'll find interesting {leans forward, gestures with hands}. There were wars, you know? The Balkans were very crazy, we were in the '90s, right? You were hearing, "There is a war in Slovenia, in Bosnia, Croatia," but we could not actually see it, it was like the saying... "far from your garden, far from the heart." Whatever. But it was far, we didn't actually notice it, we didn't actually experience war here {reflective tone, looks down briefly}. In 1993, 1992, 1994 there was a very big inflation in Serbia and Yugoslavia, ex-Yugoslavia, and people didn't have money, I mean, they had billions, but again, you know, people could not buy anything with those {slight hand gesture, shrugs}.

And as a seven-year-, eight-year-old child, going to school...keep in mind that four of us were attending school, my three brothers and one sister, given the importance of education, it was very hard to educate all of us {earnest voice, nods slowly}. I will never forget the sacrifice of my sister, she had to sacrifice her education so I could go to school, right? So, someone had to drop out, it was either my brother or my sister, my sister said...you know, the majority of our aunties were going to school till the fourth grade and they were dropping out due to the fact that they said they knew enough, they knew how to write, how to read, how to count, and that was enough {pauses} for them (softens voice).

My sister...her dream was really, always, to kind of go to school. She gave up (voice cracks slightly) {looks down}. Since then, that was in 1993, I had to take education, going to school, seriously. I was not excellent in school, you know? I was a small, crazy gypsy running all the time, things like that, but I was really paying attention to the professors and teachers who were giving the lectures (laughs briefly, then smiles). It is funny that in primary school I never, never did my homework, or I never, never opened a notebook or a book at home to learn something, but I listened in class and could remember everything very well and could kind of go and speak about it for hours.

Anyhow, so yeah, and then the worst thing that happened during this process was in 1998, sometimes in June, when you're hearing from different TV shows or news, you know? They were saying that there was a terroristic attack in Stanovce, a terroristic attack in Sibovce, a terroristic attack in Hamidija, a terroristic attack in all these villages that were neighboring the village where I lived. I'm talking about June, July 1998 and, you know? somehow we were all stressed because we didn't know actually what war is, we didn't have guns at all, I mean, we never saw guns in our lives, we saw guns only in the movies, right? And then all of a sudden you see the Serbian army coming to Plemetina with all these tanks, guns, you know? heavy artillery and such, and they go and they say, "Tonight we will attack Albanian communities," {raises his voice} our neighbors! I'm emphasizing this part, our neighbors! {wide hand gestures}.

So, if you come to Plemetina, you will notice that neighborhoods are somehow segregated. There is a neighborhood with only the Serbian community, there is a neighborhood with only the Roma community, there is also a neighborhood which is not just one community, where we live, and there is something that nowadays we call a social building, but back then it was a camp, Camp Plemetina. Maybe it's important to note that we live 750 meters, let's say 1000 feet from the thermal factory Kosovo B, which it's very close by and that's the place where my father was working. Going back to June, when the attack happened, when the Serbian army came to the village like a huge "gun machinery," I don't know how to name it, they forced Albanians to move out of their houses {hesitates, frowns slightly}. This also means firing into their houses, this means also burning their houses, but this means also throwing bombs in their houses.

People had to leave, Albanians moved out {voice escalates}. And I remember very well the day after we were ready to go to school, right? and it was summer, school was almost done, completed, I was in fourth grade back then, and then all of a sudden, the teachers came, the principal came, the school principal came to the school, and they said, "There is no school anymore." And I was very sad, not

because of the school, not because I liked going to school, it was because I could not meet my friends, (softens voice) {looks wistful} ...Just as information, before the conflict, the war started in Kosovo, we were 24 Roma and 12 Serbs attending one classroom.

Then maybe six, seven, eight months later, the war officially started. It was 24th of March 1999, when the famous statement was made in the news, saying that NATO is bombing Yugoslavia, and the first bomb fell (grim pause). You lived in a war for three months, and I wish no one will experience things that we experienced as a community, or I personally did, as Avni (voice cracks slightly).

It's so hard, Alisan, to know that you can have breakfast, but you go to sleep without dinner, right? It's very, very hard (pleading tone) {leans toward Alisan}. And nationalism as such grew as hell in all communities living in Plemetina, right? Serbs were coming to Plemetina from different places, they were passing with tanks, cars... A couple of times my father, working for the thermal factory in Kosovo, was, you know, targeted to be shot. Of course, fortunately this didn't happen, but we could not get out of the house at all (sighs).

There was this sound that I still kind of, you know, remember. It was a sound, you know, like a sound from where they decided to notify us that NATO is attacking, right (high-pitched hum). And I will never forget the sound, it was like... I was, like, what the hell is this now? {acts scared} And this sound kept repeating all the time, this is how bombing was often happening. Living only 13 kilometers from Pristina, you could hear when bombs fell on Pristina, it's a capital city, and it was a great mess. As a personal experience, what I will never ever forget in my life is that in Miloshevo, which is a village very close to Plemetina, there was a base, a Serbian base, and NATO bombed it, right? {nods}

It was a beautiful morning, grandma, my father, they decided to have coffee, their morning coffee together, my mom too (softens voice). And usually I wake up very early, I was like, all right, the only one of us kids who would be out with them, just to tell you this story. And then I saw, actually, we saw, you know, the sound started, *sirena* we called it, right (makes the sound of the siren again). It started, and we were like, okay, this is happening. But we saw that the bombs, the grenades were falling, like...it's so bad seeing the grenades falling, first 1,500 meters from you, and it's getting closer, 1,000 meters, 500 meters, right? There is one at 300 meters coming to you, the grenades are coming to you, you can see the dust from the soil that they're throwing grenades.

And then, all of a sudden, my grandmother said, because she was a survivor of the Second World War, she said, like, "Open your mouth as much as possible, or you will get deaf!" I'd say, yeah. And I was like, I didn't know what to do, you know, I was 11 years old, and I was like, ah, you know, "God!" (shaky voice) {wide eyes}. Then I remembered God, man, then I knew, and then I met God, actually. I even started believing (voice lifts). So, the best part is this, that actually, you know, people can barely remember growing up, or how you are trying to understand who you as a person, as an individual, are. But that moment was for me when I understood my persona, my character, I understood who Avni is (reflective tone) {slight smile}.

Back then, I was 11, I didn't know who Avni was, but at that moment I knew, because there was panic, there was fear, I was afraid. And then you really didn't know how to, kind of, react, what to do, because you see 1,500 meters, 1,000, it's coming to you, and then you are really, as they say, you are very close to meet the angel of death in that moment, right? And then what I did as a child is that... I knew there was a very small place where they were placing woods, and I hid there. I didn't show up outside all day, I was not outside, did not go outside at all because of fear, because of trauma, because of ...you know, understanding that my life is ending {leans forward, breathless}. Of course, those who were a bit older understood that this was not going to repeat, because, when it fell in the same spot twice and we were okay... but just to give a better explanation, when the bombs were exploding, all the windows of the houses were broken, the glass was broken, it exploded, broke into pieces.

And at the same time, knowing the fact that I couldn't go outside and see the sky anymore, what I did is that I closed my eyes when I decided to move from my hiding place, and went to the room, inside, and just, like, I closed my eyes so that I couldn't see the sky, right? {closes eyes briefly}. It was hell, a mess, it's, like, really, I'm telling you, I'm trying to be as descriptive as I can, but it was something that you cannot describe very easily, not to the people who didn't survive the same.

The best part is that I could not go outside for at least two, three days, until my friends from school came, and they were like, "Let's go play football in the streets!" (small laugh) {shrugs}. So, we didn't have a playground, a ground where we could play, but we were playing in the streets, and I was like, you know what? This will never happen again, let's go outside and play {waves hand forward}. These, more or less, were kind of the first step of my traumas, or my experience of the war.

Now I must mention a story which is very important. During the war, during the conflict, I told you, there were the Serbian guards, policemen and, soldiers going around Plemetina, and I remember that often we were outside, we went outside with our uncle, because you wanted to hear what was happening and you had only one TV channel back then, only Prvi,¹ you know? and you could not have good information from there, but you could inform yourself by going to the village, somewhere, and people were talking...

We went outside, and then, I remember, there was this special army from the Serbian side, we called them *Plavci*.² Actually, they came very close to killing my uncle, auntie, my two brothers, a sister, siblings, more or less, and, yeah, a couple of friends, they came with us to, kind of, be informed. And they told us, like, "Go near these trees, so we can just, like, kill you, and no one will see you, no one will notice you." But luckily, this Serbian guy was passing with this tractor, he was doing some agriculture shit, sorry, his things, and, yeah, and he saw what was happening, he came there, and he was like, "What the hell are you guys doing? Because these are our friends, we grew up together!" We, you know... so, luckily, we survived, but I'm talking about it now, and when I'm thinking about it... It was really... we were very close to being killed, and no one would know, maybe we could be buried, or not, somehow...It's a nightmare (pauses, exhales).

¹ Radio Television of Serbia – First (*Prvi*) Program.

² From Plav, a region of Montenegro, Montenegrins.

Of course, I will also never, ever forget one thing: that, never, ever, God forbid, it would happen to anyone that I know - whether friends or enemies although I don't have enemies, but I have friends, to anyone on this earth -, that, you are alive, you consider yourself as a living person, but you really don't have what to eat, for three months. For two, three weeks, we were only eating, all the time, beans and bread, beans and bread, beans and bread, till the moment when, you know, we understood that it was over (relieved sigh) {leans back}.

And, of course, after all wars, crises are happening, right, and then, the best part is that, you know, the international community came here, this is how we understood the importance of living, the importance of helping, and when I say helping, I don't mean mentoring and tutoring, or something else, but I mean really helping with humanitarian aid, as such, you know. And then, we had meat, for the first time, after three months and a half, and, you know, we had oil that we could cook with, you know, and then, we had actually the chance to try different food (small smile). Somehow, I always say that due to these three months and a half of eating only beans, I have a feeling that I will never ever again eat beans. Now, I like them, but not that much (chuckles) {shrugs}.

Alisan Skenderi: Thank you very much {nods}. My second question to you is, this Kosovo war was between Serbs and Albanians, but what about you, being from a Roma background? Do you have to take sides to choose whether you were with Serbs, or with Albanians, or do you have to stay neutral, or how did it function in '99? How do you think a lot of people did, when it came to choosing sides, being from a Roma background?

Avni Mustafa: There was not such a thing as choosing sides, Alisan, just so you understand {points at Alisan}. So, I was 13 years old, and I remember very well that there were youngsters who were, back then, 17, 18, 19 years old, 20, some of them. Military service, back then, was mandatory. It was mandatory, and then they didn't ask you either, "Do you want to go and fight for your country?" But it was really mandatory, you know. There were two soldiers coming to your yard and taking the youngsters, and that's it {slaps hands together}. They could not say no, because if they said no, they were going to prison. They could not say no.

The majority of Roma that I know, that were living in my neighborhood, were forced to go to the army. Some of them had just finished their army service, the one-year period, but right after that, if you were young and able to fight, then soldiers were in your yard to take you. No matter what you said, either no or yes, they were taking you, full stop, that's it {cuts hand through air, signaling that it's over}.

Alisan Skenderi: So, you're saying that being Roma did not matter? That they didn't have any preference or anything, they would just put you into a group?

Avni Mustafa: No matter whether you belonged to a Roma or another minority ethnicity community, you would be taken, put in a truck, and go to war, that's it. Just so you know, because back then, in 1999, there was one country, Yugoslavia. Those people who had the Yugoslav IDs were Yugoslavs, and they were taken, no matter their ethnicity. You are Yugoslav, and you must fight for your country {points upward}.

That was the ideology, that was people's national approach back then, and this is how the majority of Roma were forced to go to the army, or "re-go" to army, you know what I mean? {nods quickly} So, they went once, they had to go again, and this actually caused Roma, mainly Roma, now I'm not talking about Serbs, I'm not talking about Albanians, I'm not talking about anyone, but it caused Roma to be targeted up to this day, after 25, 26 years, as very close allies of the Serbian army. But they were not asked whether they wanted or didn't want to go {shakes head}. For the record, as an ethnicity, as a community, Roma were not actually willing to enter the war with anyone, and this is not what Avni is saying, these are the arguments of the Roma community in general. They never, ever, went to war with anyone. We don't have a word for war, there is no word for war in Romanes, think about it: we use *ljufta*, *ljufta*, which is an Albanian word; *marebe* means fight, not war.

Alisan Skenderi: Okay, can you tell me about the next steps of your approach to the war, what did you do, and how did you overcome this, I don't want to call it PTSD, but like this suffering and the bad memories of yours?

Avni Mustafa: After the war, maybe it's an important information, Albanians came back to Kosovo, to their own houses, they came to the *mahalla*,³ to the Roma *mahalla*, accusing Roma that they were stealing or taking things from their houses, their homes, and back then, I remember that Albanians came to our house, and they accused us of taking clothes, they call it a *boryake teshja*,⁴ the bride's clothes for the wedding.

And what was very good is the fact that my mom was keeping her clothes, all the clothes from the wedding, from the engagement, and things like that, she was always keeping them, and you always knew that, in one box, what do you call it, a folder? No? My mom was keeping her clothes there, we never ever actually touched it, because we know, we knew, this is history, it belongs here.

So, when the Albanians came, they were coming to our houses with knives, and guns, you know, different stupid metals, telling us that we did wrong, and you know, one morning, all of a sudden, you see four or five Albanians in our yard, and you just ask yourself, "What the hell is happening, right?" (frowns) {raises hands in confusion} You don't know, right?

But what I know for sure is that they were friends with my father too, and the friendship disappeared, man, because they were in our yard with knives and things like that, and you know, trying to look for their things, because I'm not saying that the things didn't disappear during the war, but I'm also saying, this is a fact, it is true, that we had our things, we didn't need other things, additional ones.

Here is the thing, they came, it was morning, they came inside our house, even though my father and my mom were saying, "We didn't take anything from you guys, please, we're friends" - and somehow my family were friends with the Serbian community, with the Albanian community, with all possible communities there -, it was very hard to convince them that we didn't have anything, right? {gestures pleadingly}

³ Word of Arabic origin that means neighborhood.

⁴ Bridal trousseau.

And then they came inside the house, you have the right to kill a person, whoever is coming to your yard, or to your house, entering to your house with no permission to enter, but they came inside. They were checking for their things, and what they saw was a trunk with these clothes from a wedding and things like that, but in the end, you know, they saw that these clothes did not belong to them, but to my mom, and I remember the moment when they were taking all the things outside, they were putting them on the ground, they didn't care, and they left it like that. And I remember my mom, I will never forget this picture, one day maybe I'll draw it, but I will never, ever forget the scene that I saw after they left, I saw my mom sitting there, you know, making sure that everything was settled again, you know, as it was before, you know, it's a nightmare, but anyways... (sighs heavily) {rubs eyes}.

Then as I said at the beginning, the international community arrived in Kosovo, it was, it was so great, a good thing, there were people who, at the beginning, we didn't understand, but we knew some English from school, "Hello! How are you? Johnny, Johnny, yes, papa," you know, that kind of thing, but not much, then you saw, I remember the Norwegians came from Plemetina, you know, and they built a huge base, it was lots of fun, it was very good seeing them, because you knew that you are safe, right? (smiles faintly) {nods} You no longer have these groups of people who are going to stay around all night, and then you can make sure that you guys, I mean, the Roma families are safe, and seeing Norwegians come from there was very good, and they actually brought some peace, definitely.

And then the international community, you want me to speak about them too, yes? Slowly, but surely, we grew up, you cannot grow up in one year by yourself, but we were 13, 14, and we met some people who were, back then, they called themselves human rights activists {raises eyebrows}. We didn't know at all what human rights are, man, at all, you could never ever imagine... human, okay, human, you know what this means, but rights, what the hell? So, (laughs lightly) back then, we, I, for the first time, as a 13 years old guy, I met a great man, and nowadays he is also my friend, I met Randy, Rand, he came with the idea that, okay, so, Albanians, they're fine, they're going to school now, Serbs, they're having a certain standards, but Roma are living in very bad economic and life conditions, so let's help the Roma. And I remember that Dai, my older brother, started working with them. There was another great friend of ours, Drita, and also Aferdita, they were three youngsters, they were working together, you know, with children, you know, making sure that they're going to have fun after the war, after the crisis.

We didn't have the... what do you call it, a trauma treatment after that, not at all, but you have to fight within yourself, so that you pass the situation, you kind of forget everything, and this is actually what happened. So, to make a long story short, because we are almost there, right, we, all of us, all of us, what I'm saying, I'm thinking about a certain group of people who were ready to learn and recognize another mentality, accept another mentality. It was such a beautiful thing to see that one person who is 40 years old is going to treat, let's say, a teenager, 13 years old, back then I was 13 years old, Drita also, a great friend of ours, was 13 years old, treat us as if we were adults, right, he asked for our opinion.

With all due respect, when you are 13 years old, or 14 years old, in your family, a Roma family, with this mentality, you are never asked, no one is asking about your opinion, actually no one gives a damn about your opinion, and then we heard, we are hearing for the first time that he is asking us, “What do you think about this? What do you think about that?”. This helped us to speak openly, have self-esteem (smiles proudly) {touches chest}.

And I tried to implement things we learned from the period from 2000 until now, right? Some people are going to say that it’s a shame, if you are 37, 38, to say that you are still learning, but thanks to the mentality that the international community brought to Kosovo, we are... I can say that I am still learning, because I will learn until the last day of my life. I will try to learn and implement things that are going to be good for me, personally first as an individual but also for the majority, minority, every possible human being, animals, global warming... whatever, you name it {spreads hands wide}.

Alisan Skenderi: Thank you Avni very much. I think my final questions are: How did you come out of all of that, how did you overcome everything and basically, did everything that you have done until now? How did you manage to become one of the greatest civil society leaders in the Roma community, how did you manage to invest in a lot of students nowadays, including me, thank you for that, and how did Avni become the Avni that he is today?

Avni Mustafa: You remember Alisan when I said that my sister had to give up her education so I could go and educate myself? You remember that part? {points at Alisan} So... I owed this to my sister, right? {touches heart} Just so you know, back in...I will tell you the exact year, back in 2013, when I was managing a production, a film production, again with a friend, of course, I saw a call for helping students, giving them a scholarship, make sure they are going to university, staying in university, faculty or whatever, and graduate at the end. That was the main goal. I said that it was a huge sacrifice, it was a huge sacrifice for my sister to drop out so I could go to school, and I really wanted to, because knowing that there were not many people accepting me into the community, but I didn’t really mind “Who was Who” back then, I really wanted to change my profile.

Just so you know, in 2013, no, 2008, 2009, I started working in Pristina, knowing one word of Albanian, because I didn’t really speak Albanian, I was living in a place where Serbian people, Serbian speaking people were the majority. So, what I did is, I came to Pristina in 2008 and started going to a *burektore*⁵ asking, “A keni naj burek me djath, ju lutem?” [Do you have a cheese burek, please?] or “Një makiato?” [A macchiato coffee?] This is how I started speaking Albanian, and the best part is that I learned a lot and from 2008 until 2013, with the great friend of ours Faton Mustafa, we produced 54 reports about the social inclusion of Roma in Kosovo, but also 8 documentaries. I was also actively involved with the two editions of the Rolling Festival.

So, my point is like, I gave my best work into a different profile, and I really found myself, due to my sister’s sacrifice of her education. Am I a leader? Hell, I don’t know, what I know for sure is that I do my best to kind of, like, give chances or opportunities to someone who needs the opportunity or a chance,

⁵ Bakery, sometimes also a small diner.

or who needs to go be educated. So, Alisan, you now have a better view of who I am and what I'm talking about {points at Alisan, smiles}.

Also, I want to underline this part, so, you are 21 and you are really young, anyway... There are still people in need, and my birthday is on the 30th of August, two days before school opens. And back then, I told you, there was a big crisis, a big economic crisis in Yugoslavia and my father, my mom, my grandpa, my aunties, were giving me a small amount of money as a present for my birthday, and I never got, like, a huge amount of money, but that was enough to buy notebooks for me and my brothers and it was okay because we could go to school with the notebooks. And of course, we bought pens and whatever. And I really saw how much this little thing was helping my family, because my father didn't have to think about it, because it was not his money, but it was money from my grandpa, grandma, aunties...

So, what I am doing nowadays, which is many and many years later, 100,000 years later... (laughs) Every time it is my birthday, what I am doing is: there are two social buildings really close to here, where people are not really living well, and I am going there and giving notebooks and pens to the children to go to school, so their parents don't have to worry about that {nods proudly}. I really, really think and believe that an educated person, an individual, either a he or a she, it does not matter, is really something and, in my perspective, is the best outcome. And never forget this: I would not be who I am today if I did not have the experience of going through a war, nearly being killed, not being able to eat, eating only beans every day for three months and all the other things that happened {shakes head slowly}.

And these are all the experiences that helped me personally understand life better, understand the importance of living and understand the importance of dealing with and working for people in need. I don't dare to call myself "leader," but I do dare to say to myself that I am or might be, one day, a good role model to follow, maybe {shrugs, slight smile}. Thank you very much Alisan! {nods}

Alisan Skenderi: Thank you very much Avni! {smiles, nods}