

Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH GARENTINA KRAJA

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Duration: 158 minutes

Present:

1. Garentina Kraja (Speaker)
2. Aurela Kadriu (Interviewer)
3. Donjetë Berisha (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

Garentina Kraja: I am Garentina Kraja. Currently a lecturer at the American University in Kosovo. Otherwise, a former journalist and former adviser of the President of Kosovo, Atifete Jahjaga.

Aurela Kadriu: Garentina, can you tell us about your early childhood memories, about your family? What kind of family were you? How was your life?

Garentina Kraja: I am the oldest child in a family of five members, I mean we are five siblings. My father is an author, actually a journalist. He began his profession as a journalist in the '70s, in the late '70s, since he began to study at the University of Pristina. My father comes from the village of Krajë in Montenegro, actually from the Krajë region, the village of Kshtenjë. He came to Kosovo. I mean, he has a more special story. His family, his brothers chose the path of migration to America, in the meantime my father came to Pristina and started studying Albanian Language and Literature within the University of Pristina which opened in 1974. I mean, he is among the first generations of the University of Pristina.

That is where he met my mother who comes from Istog, from the village of Cërrc in Istog. She is, I believe, she actually is the first woman from her family who continued her studies. My mother, just like my father, studied Albanian Language and Literature at the University of Pristina.

I told you that I am the oldest child, which in our family doesn't imply...I was at the same time the most spoiled child in my family, but at the same time I was the child with the most obligations, and being the oldest child, it was expected from me to be an example for the others, my sisters and brother. Gresa and I have a gap of twelve years, which is very good because Gresa helps me stay connected to the reality of the young generation in a way, to see how they think, how they function. Because with the others we kind of are, we don't have very big differences in age.

School... let me start from my first memories, I would specify school among them. I went to Josip Broz Tito school, during that time...Josip Broz Tito in the neighborhood Bregu i Diellit [Sunny Hill]. We moved to another apartment. We were living in Bregu i Diellit, then we went down to Ulpiana, but since I was very close to my classmates and my teacher, I didn't change school and this way I created

more troubles for my parents. But maybe because I was the oldest child, they listened to me and they supported me into not changing school.

They escorted me to school everyday and came to pick me up every day. At that time, circulating within the city wasn't that easy because there weren't many cars. However, my parents had a car, though there were not many cars in general. Or the buses, at that time we didn't use them that much. So, growing up, I caused more troubles to my parents who had to come and pick me up. They did it in order not to destroy the idea of community which I had created at the Josip Broz Tito school.

Then other memories, I mean other things that I remember from elementary school are mainly *uneventful* [English], not much important, until the fifth grade or sixth, when it began...I think this is the year...I mean, I was twelve at that time, I was ten in '88. I was twelve in the '90s, I was in the fifth or sixth grade when the segregation at school began, when we started going, the school name changed, and when we actually started facing physical barriers inside the school, which divided Albanian classrooms from the Serbian ones.

Of course, school worked on different schedules because of the parallel system. Albanian classrooms were overcrowded. The classes were big, Pristina was smaller but there were also fewer schools. I don't remember any big change at that time, except the physical barriers that were put in schools and that made the communication between Albanians and Serbs impossible. And even though, even before there was no...I don't remember having had a warm communication, but however, that is where the, how to say, dual experiences began to be created.

I mean we already started seeing a reality which we had experienced in the parallel system, apart from the repression which we continuously experienced. Of course, school wasn't the only memory. School was always a burden. It started becoming a burden in the sense that we had to go there every day. But what was more impressive at that time were the protests that took place in '88, '89. And an uneasiness at home, in the sense that my parents were always preoccupied.

I mean it was the time when my parents, my father worked for *Rilindja*, my mother worked, she was a teacher, she taught Albanian language at the Technical High School in Pristina, and we as children were somehow exposed, not isolated, to the conversations that they had at home. We lived, as I said, in an apartment and we often saw... our parents were middle class and their friends were the middle class of Kosovo... I mean, other journalists, I remember the director of the Television of Pristina at that time, Agim Mala, I mean he was a friend of my parents, various authors, they always came and we went to their place.

Their children were approximately the same age as ours and we hung out together. But, let me tell you again that we couldn't be totally isolated from what was happening outside our windows. And actually the conversations that often happened in our presence, late at night, were about the situation, the current situation in Kosovo. I remember when we returned from my father's friends, from Dardania to Bregu i Diellit at that time, or even to Ulpiana where we moved later, we often had to pass by the students' canteen where there were students protesting inside. I think they organized a hunger strike at that time.

It was '87 or '88 if I am not mistaken, when things already started to become worse in Kosovo. Of course, we understood very little, at least I understood very little of what was happening, but I know that those concerns were reflected in our house...

Back then, my maternal uncles were involved with the *ilegale* movement, and even though as a child I didn't understand the magnitude of their actions, or their political views, and I didn't... as a child, I remember that they were always careful when they talked, especially for me as the oldest child in the family, they were careful not to talk about their activity in front of us. Partly because there was such a climate, in which you were politically purged, you could lose your job, you could be robbed, arrested in case there were indications that you were in any way connected to the movements of that time.

Of course, even today I continue not having a clear idea of what my maternal uncles were doing, but I know that their houses were often raided. And I know that somehow that manifested itself in the situation within our family. I know that we often received phone calls early in the morning from my mother's relatives to tell her that one of my maternal uncles had been arrested, or that their houses were raided again [to search] for arms or various banners. And I know, I mean, I remember (cries)... my mother, was totally broken by these events that, I mean, that happened to her family.

Yes, of course she was always afraid to express it in front of us. Partly because of the consequences that my father and she could experience, she... but also her family. One of my maternal uncles, one of my mother's brothers, ended up in prison for longer time than the others. Others were arrested time after time. Any time there were incidents in Kosovo, they were among the first families targeted to be raided and arrested. And of course, beatings followed as well as other things that happened to them during their time in prison.

My mother tried, I mean, also my father, both of them tried to spare us from details, from knowing the details of what was happening. But we were children in the end of the day, and I did everything in order to understand what was happening, what really happened to my maternal uncles. Not that, I want to say it again, I am 38 today, it's been a long time, almost thirty years since that time, but I still don't know the details thoroughly and in depth. I only know that they feel like they have contributed just like many other people who have contributed in Kosovo to how things developed further. I mean, independence and the separation of Kosovo from Yugoslavia, Serbia.

This is more or less what I remember from the '80s, I am talking about '86- '89. Then in '89 I remember my father gathering with his friends in our living room and... I know that he went to work. I know that he had his coffee at the café Elida. This is what I know as important points of his life. His work at *Rilindja* first as a journalist covering culture, then as a cultural editor in *Rilindja*. And I mean, the newspaper that he brought to our home everyday and the eagerness to read it, even if we didn't understand what was happening.

Of course, my father worked in the situation of censorship and self-censorship of the Communist Yugoslavia age. I mean, of the time when it is true that you might've been privileged at a workplace but you had to censor yourself in exchange for that, or at least write in a way, be critical in a way that would allow the newspaper to continue and yourself have the chance to work. But at the same time contributing to a deeper understanding of how things happened in Kosovo...

As I told you, in '89 I remember more clearly these meetings with a very small group of my father's friends in our apartment, and the fear, but at the same time an enthusiasm for the future. I mean, I remember my father with a radio transistor in his hand trying to listen to the news, the Serbian editions of that time, if I am not mistaken the BBC or Voice of America, Free Europe, these radios... as the only remaining mechanism, as the only remaining connection with the rest of the world.

And I remember that at the same time, we spent many New Year's Eves at our maternal uncles' in Istog. I remember trying to catch in some way that... I mean those means were advanced, even though primitive, and we tried to catch TVSH at that time, the funny TV shows of TVSH prepared for New Year's Eve. Because in my family, even though we lived in Yugoslavia, there were never ideas of brotherhood-unity, which I believe was partly influenced by my mother and her family's experience with the Yugoslav system, but also by my father's. I mean, my father, it is true that he came from Montenegro but he was educated in the spirit of Kosovo and he adopted Kosovo as his homeland.

And he was politically engaged towards advancing things in Kosovo, creating the resistance, the beginnings of the peaceful resistance. He was part of the tight-knit group of people who founded the *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* [LDK] as a movement for independence or as a movement to demand the right of Kosovo to secede, just like other Yugoslav units. I mean, the disintegration of Yugoslavia had just begun and Albanians from Kosovo... they faced the need to mobilize, or put otherwise, because maybe we should be more subjective, my father together with his close friends saw it as a moment to make vocal demands, to shape and make the demands of Albanians from Kosovo vocal, of Albanians in the former Yugoslavia, to demand independence.

This is more or less... and I also remember... I have to tell you this detail because I believe that in a way it inspired me professionally (laughs), it is a surprise in itself. At that time, we as children watched the Third Channel, *Treči Kanal*, it seemed more innovative to us... this went along with our desire to watch MTV, to watch and communicate in English. At that time the Third Channel would broadcast TV shows, or the night program, I remember the TV show *Midnight Caller* [English] and Jack Killian. I don't know, maybe the first connection with the world, the first connection with English happened approximately at that time.

I mean, we grew up with that show. At that time there weren't many activities in Kosovo nor in Pristina. I don't remember myself going out much, playing somewhere. I remember myself watching TV or the memories of protests and events that took place in my family. Never was I a central part of them, but always by-standing as they happened.

Aurela Kadriu: Were your parents fired in the '90s?

Garentina Kraja: Yes. In fact, before they were fired...My mother was working as a teacher. My mother, when the parallel system was established, when the decision for the parallel system to be established was taken, my mother taught at the Technical school, in homeschooling. During the '90s, my younger sister was born and my mother took her maternal leave.

Of course, just like everyone else's destiny, *Rilindja* was also closed. My father, I mean his activity as a journalist at *Rilindja* was over the moment *Rilindja* in Pristina was closed, or the time *Rilindja* was closed to them. My father continued working on the creation of the Information Center of LDK. I guess

it was called the Information Center of Kosovo, QIK. I know that their offices were in Qafa on the second floor, and they tried to issue a magazine called *Ora* [The Clock]. That's what my father did. I mean, he basically organized the support to the mobilization of the LDK, the *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës*.

But as I told you in the beginning, even today when I try to talk to him, the idea was not to create a political party, the idea was really to mobilize a movement, with all the shortcomings of that time, such as perhaps having monopolized the political scene in Kosovo, but however, because... the cause was so important and weighed so much. The Kosovo Democratic League was important in the villages of Kosovo at that time. A big part of my father's activity was extending LDK to other villages and cities of Kosovo.

That is why during those years, I hardly remember my father at home. I remember him coming back from the field coming back from long meetings that took place somewhere in Pristina. And that time, I remember that we spent most of the time at home with our mother. Sometimes my mother's students who were older looked after us, I mean girls who were my mother's students when in middle school, but were currently studying at the University. And my mother would sometimes ask them for help to come and look after us at home.

I remember, I mean, I remember this period with a lot of comings and goings at home. A great fear of my mother for my father. I remember her staying awake until late at night, waiting for him to come home. We lived on the first floor in Ulpiana and I know that my mother often had her eyes on the road from the kitchen, and I often remember my mother... (cries) I remember my mother near the window, waiting for my father.

In 1992, when, I mean... I was never aware that my father was asked, in fact he was recommended, advised by his friends, who had the information that his arrest was eminent... I never knew that. Seems like it was something that happened very quickly. That day I returned... I was going to Xhevdet Doda [gymnasium]. I wasn't... I wasn't, I wasn't homeschooled, but we... I finished my middle school in its former building, where the Cathedral is today.

It was a very old building. I know that often when we were angry with people, because our friends who went for example to the gymnasium Ivo Lola, Sami Frashëri later, were complaining because their educational experience was so different from the one had by those who went to Xhevdet Doda. Because we were in a building. I remember that our way of facing them was saying, "That is not a school. It used to be a horse stable, it doesn't look like a school." Actually, it looked more like a school than Ivo Lola or Sami Frashëri did later.

At least we didn't need to sit on the floor and write leaning on each other's back. We had desks. And maybe we created, within the school, we created a parallel reality to the parallel system where we tried to create a dynamic, be it with recitals or theater clubs or newspapers. We had a lame newspaper, but at least it was an activity that kept us together after school. And I remember in 1992, I mean my first year as a gymnasium student in Xhevdet Doda... otherwise, I was very bad in mathematics, something that followed me for years no matter how much time I invested to improve in that regard...

I was a first-year gymnasium student. When I returned home I found my mother cooking lunch. She

was alone at home, I don't know whether my sisters were at home or in front of the apartment building... because we would often play in front of the building. It is almost impossible to imagine that now, but at that time we spent most of the time there and a parallel education to that in school happened in front of the building where we played *mes dy zjarreve* [between two fires] and a weird game with stones which was called *xhamia* [mosque], volleyball... everything. We only had one ball for the whole neighborhood maybe, but I am telling you, that was our second education as children, and the creation of a kind of community within the building. We were more or less all the same age, with several years age difference.

Our families, as I told you earlier, were middle-class families. Intellectuals, educated parents, children who were surrounded by books, but with a strictly middle-class socioeconomic status, strictly modest. We didn't miss much, but we all dressed almost the same. We had one pair of jeans, I mean we bought them once a year and wore them every day. Sneakers, if you were lucky that year they were not given to you by somebody else. For example, I always passed my sneakers to my sisters. I don't know if they ever got to wear new ones. But since I was the oldest child in the family, I had the luck to buy new ones most of the time (laughs).

And I mean we were more or less dressed in the same way. We were all fed in the same way. We had, we were surrounded by the same literature. Translations, when I think back of the translations of *Rilindja*, they weren't extraordinary, but we grew up with them. And of course, with other activities that created and strengthened our feeling of community. But an inseparable part of our childhood was playing in front of the building... this is exactly how we referred to it, "in front of the building." And maybe a bright moment of that childhood because you didn't have... you knew people who lived in the neighborhood, you knew children and created friendships within that community. It connected us more than just being neighbors.

I returned from school. I found my mother cooking lunch. I asked, "Where is dad?" I didn't get any response (cries). I asked once again. She told me, "Dad had to go. We don't know when he will return. We don't know whether he will return." It was... of course my mother couldn't share details with me because we were always afraid that someone would come to raid the house and interrogate us, what could we know and what could we not know. How long can we keep secrets for? Are there chances that we will tell anyone? And I know that we experienced an extraordinary silence and a big fear for the fate of our father (cries).

We waited close to the telephone during the whole day in order to understand where he was. Of course, they didn't tell us the itinerary. They told us that our father was in Albania, whoever our mother was in contact with, they told us that he arrived safely and is alright, that he was safe and... Albania, at that time communism had fallen. There were turmoils there too. It wasn't a good situation there either. But however, we thought that he was in a safer place and that he was not in danger.

We remained in Pristina. At that time, even though Albania had opened up, we continued being under occupation, or we continued being besieged... at that time there was an iron siege in Pristina. Lots of policemen. We had only some places where we were allowed to go in '92. As far as I remember, we were allowed to go, at least for me it was on my way home from school, from Xhevdet Doda, which it took me around ten minutes. And if we didn't go home, we gathered in some small coffee shops that were open at that time, Santea and Queens.

That area of coffee shops exists even today, on the way to Bill Clinton Boulevard. They were close to our school. We often gathered there. After we finished school, we would go there if we had one [deutsche] mark with us. Whoever had one, could drink something and those who didn't, would only sit there. They didn't force us to leave the coffee shop if we didn't have money to pay. But in general, I mean, I remember the whole Pristina as a one lane street. To my home, to my school, to one of these coffee shops. The years '92 and '93 more or less remain like that in my memory.

What I forgot to mention is that during this period I went to America to visit my paternal uncles and that is where I started learning English and seeing the world. Seeing how people live in normal circumstances and seeing that something in my life, something that I am used to, is not a norm somewhere else. I was maybe too young to articulate the difference the way I do today, but I know that I was impressed.

When I returned, especially the second time... then with my sister in the second year of my studies, I was 16 when we went to America again, we stayed at our paternal uncle's, once in Connecticut, Norwalk, Connecticut, the second time, I mean not the second time, but we spent one part of our vacation at our paternal uncle's in Chicago, and the other at another paternal uncle's. And our experiences and those of our paternal uncles' children were different as day and night. Maybe this, I think, impressed us. I don't know how to articulate how it seemed to us, but I know that I understood that the way we lived in Kosovo, the way our family lived in Kosovo, my parents in Kosovo, isn't a norm somewhere else.

And during the summer, during my stay at my paternal uncle's, especially the second time, I know that I learned English through reading novels by Danielle Steel (laughs), I feel ashamed to admit that I made my first steps in literature with Danielle Steel's books. But it actually helped me to learn English because it was a very simple language to read. And when I returned, you know, I was able to easily communicate in English.

Now let me return, because I am making digressions in my story, but I want to stay close to '92 and the reflection of my father's move from us. My mother continued teaching at the technical school. To her it became, I mean, being a single parent who had to take care of five children at home... And she asked for leave from work. We stayed in Pristina in our apartment. Because at that time, even though Serbia wasn't focused on Kosovo... it held Kosovo under iron police repression, but there was no war. There was segregation and the apartheid got deeper here...

There was no, there was no freedom of movement, I mean we couldn't freely go to Albania to visit our father. We often met with him... I mean not that often, because there were times when we didn't meet him for six months, sometimes even one year passed without us seeing our father... we found a neutral place, the house of my paternal uncle and my grandmother in Ulcinj, it was a place where we were less afraid for his and our safety. That is where we made our visits. My father wasn't able to go out of the house. He crossed the Lake of Shkodër illegally with a boat in order to come and see us. And we travelled by bus. We went to visit our father.

Of course, it wasn't easy, because we didn't have mobile phones and we couldn't communicate in any way until we arrived. But we always felt fear on our way to Ulcinj from Pristina, and expecting him to come to Ulcinj from Albania, we were very afraid for each other. These journeys, I mean, most of the

time were not extraordinary but totally ordinary, except the time when the situation in Kosovo started getting worse, I am talking about '94 and '95.

That was the time when they started to take young men out of the buses, in the line from Pristina to Ulcinj. Again, we knew what was happening, they would ask us for ID cards and passports. Young men who were the right age for the military draft, that is, 18 or older, if any of them happened to be on the bus, they would take them out. Nobody in the bus would say a word until they were brought back. I mean, having the last name Kraja, we were always afraid that there could be consequences for us because of our father's engagement in the establishment of the LDK.

In '92, my father was asked to open the mission, I might mistake dates now, but he was asked to open the Kosovo office in Albania. And that was his last engagement with the LDK. After that, my father resigned from the LDK. The way it was interpreted to me as a young adult, as an adolescent, was that his idea wasn't, or his vision of what *the* LDK should've become, didn't get along with what the LDK had become. My father with his friends founded the LDK as a mobilizing mechanism, as I told you earlier, as a movement for independence, maybe a movement for the political emancipation of Kosovo, the citizens, the people of Kosovo, but then it turned into a political party.

And this is in fact the moment when my father cuts his ties with the LDK. He resigns and writes the book *Vite të Humbura* [Lost Years]. I mean there are other events that happen simultaneously in his life. He continues living in Tirana. We continue living in Pristina. He continues working for *Rilindja* in exile. My mother, sisters, brother and I continue living in Kosovo. Of course, with various difficulties but not... I mean except missing our father which was additional, we lived more or less in the same way as other people from our generation in Kosovo. I remember my mother with her friends wandering around the shops to find cheaper things to buy. I guess that was the experience of many Kosovar families of that time.

Part Two

[The speaker continues the story from part one]

Garentina Kraja: Simultaneously with these family developments at home, a recovery of our generation began. And this makes an important part of my life, first with the Catholic Church in Kosovo which at that time began holding various courses of English and Italian language. The Catholic Church was in our neighborhood and we often went there as an extracurricular activity. Then they started helping us make a newspaper, I mean a leaflet...today I am calling it a newspaper, I mean, I am calling it a leaflet because back then we used to call it a newspaper because we didn't have anything better...in which we wrote more or less, the articles, if you read them today, they seem like essays. But again, that helped us in the creation of a community, of a responsibility, an extracurricular activity.

Since I had learned English or I hoped that I had learned English in America, when I returned I tried to organize a small course for the others, to teach others English. And I remember that in one of the makeshift classes within the church, a group, we gathered and tried to learn English. At the same time, I tried to be part of a wider group of people, in fact a close group of people who brought Post-pessimists to life.

Post-pessimists were, in fact, its core began at the house of Nora Hafizademi. Nora was a girl from our neighborhood who was studying Medicine at that time, in fact she was in the high school of Medicine and I have no idea how, but Nora had contacts with people from abroad. And I remember that first they gathered a group of people in her apartment without a clear idea, but an idea of a *network* [English], a youth network who were different at that time because all their grades were Fives or they participated in extracurricular activities in Pristina on various subjects and ways.

Petrit [Selimi] was part of that meeting to. I didn't know Petrit until that moment. But from that, even though we went to the same school, we were in Xhevdet Doda...or maybe this was the first year in Xhevdet Doda and we didn't get to meet before. But we gathered there and then we continued from Nora's apartment. And maybe Petrit can give more detailed information of how this move from Nora's apartment to his happened, and how Post-pessimists were brought to life.

Post-pessimists were, the idea was to create a youth group in various countries or republics of Yugoslavia and exchange, as a new discussion forum, exchange the experiences of the dissolution of Yugoslavia's with each other and what our societies were going through during this collapse of the state. And at the same time to attempt to create a critical mass within these countries. And today I don't say that we knew that we were creating a critical mass, but we went and gathered people who were around our groups, not to say our cliques. Because clique has a negative connotation nowadays. But at that time, they were simply groups of people with whom we got along, people who were part of the magazine *Shpresa* or part of recitals at Xhevdet Doda, or were engaged in the youth forum, I mean, people who came from...people who wanted to be active.

For us who lived in the parallel system, with all the burden of unemployed parents, divided families as a result of political circumstances in Kosovo, with these burdens of the situation, police, segregation, one-way roads, really... Post-pessimists were somewhat in the middle, in the middle of this reality and MTV. Almost all of us had satellite dishes at home at that time and we followed music, we followed various TV shows. Of course, we couldn't dress like our generation, because we had no financial means, but we tried with what we had, to create the image of a generation, I mean, to walk along the norms which our society or generation said or walked beyond the borders of Kosovo, beyond the borders of Yugoslavia, beyond this war.

I am still amazed of how we were able to live between these two parallel worlds. But maybe Post-pessimists were the middle that helped us, because there we gathered, people with the same origin even though with radically different experiences. And I believe that we managed to understand how different our experiences of growing up were when we sat with each other, we became aware that not all of us had the same experiences and not all of us understand what is happening, not all of us see things in the same way. And maybe that homogenized us as a group in another way, it helped it become a group that listen to each other's opinions. It wasn't always easy. To me it was very difficult, sitting in a room face-to-face with people from Serbia, for example. I had prejudices against them, I blamed them for what happened to me personally, in my life.

It was difficult in the conditions in which we were educated at school, without books, with dictations, borrowing [books from each other]. The book for example, the book, *Albana* would use it in the morning and I would use it in the afternoon in order to finish homework, or finish homework in groups so that we could all share one book. It was difficult for me to overcome these personal daily experiences and have, be open-minded about the opinions of my peers coming from Serbia. I think that at the same time we made them aware of the situation in which we lived in Kosovo and of course

this happened the other way around too. Not all of them were guilty for Milošević's policies and this is the approach upon which we built the spirit of Post-pessimists.

We somehow created a parallel university and with this parallel university, I mean with this parallel universe in which we lived ourselves, but it also helped us to remain, to save ourselves, to save ourselves and become more open-minded towards the future. I mean the idea was through Post-pessimists, to try to project a future where the war is over or it doesn't happen at all. The hope for us in Kosovo was for it not to happen at all, because the war was happening for our peers in Bosnia. When they came to meet us, I remember a group from Tuzla. Tuzla wasn't part of the war at that time. I remember thinking, I mean, looking at them with pain and thinking whether we would have the same destiny.

Of course, that we had the same destiny as they, but we still didn't know at that time. And we somehow tried to do everything we could to break the *status quo* of the parallel system, of the education which really...how difficult it was going to school every day, not knowing what would happen to you the next day. Tomorrow didn't exist in our vocabulary. At the same time, I think how visionary it was having Post-pessimists, having a space, maybe today I would call it a *safe space* [English], where we all could go, no matter our *backgrounds* [English] and discuss with each other with an open mind.

Those of us who were part of this group were more privileged than the others because nobody from Kosovo travelled at that time...and we managed to go to various conferences abroad. And we were privileged in this sense. But at the same time, we tried to bring those experiences back home, be it through the leaflet which we issued *Postpessimistat* [Post-pessimists], be it through various activities that aimed to raise awareness [among] people at that time, various exhibitions that we tried to organize, or various concerts that we supported. Of course, we didn't have any fund except the payment for the rent and a coordinator.

I remember that for the newspaper, together with Zana Luci we went door to door to the businesses of that time, to ask the Albanian owners, to ask them for ten {Deutsche} Marks so that we could collect the money to issue the leaflet. Because of course, we needed money to print it. We weren't paid but we needed money to print the newspaper. If you see the covers of *Postpessimistat* today, you will see that they were creative. Jehona dealt with their design most of the time. We are the protagonists of most of them, we wrote, we photographed...But it's very, I often stop and think how was it possible to have such enthusiasm, considering everything that was happening around us, considering the *status quo*.

Maybe that was the only way that helped us survive within these circumstances. We kept this activity alive more or less until '97, within Post-pessimists. Post-pessimists were a second home. There was the debate club which was a club where we wrote, it was a club within which we learned the dynamics within groups, a group where we made our best friends. My friendship was set by Post-pessimists, and it shaped me as a person, that experience shaped me and the people who were around me during the '90s.

Aurela Kadriu: What was the nature of the articles that you published in the leaflet?

Garentina Kraja: Leaflet (laughs). Diverse. One of them for example, one issue was dedicated to the rock scene in Kosovo, in Pristina. We wrote about various groups at that time, various bands who rehearsed in a miserable condition. Of course, the idea was to keep rock alive through activities. We

interviewed people, we interviewed various artists who produced art at that time. Exhibitions, various exhibitions were held. I mean, if you browse *Postpesimistat* today, you get the perception that it was a very dynamic artistic period happening in Pristina at the time of the parallel system, but it wasn't really like that.

These were very modest attempts of a life, of a capital, or a town. To us maybe that was a tool to survive. We are, I mean, within our communities we aimed to support positive things that happened within our community. At the same time trying to create a name for Post-pessimists. A name, I don't want to say individually for one of us, because as children we didn't have such ambitions...I don't remember that any of us, maybe there were ambitions within the group, but I don't remember any of us thinking about the next ten years or what would happen to us.

In fact, to us, today I think that those articles were a tool to resist the *status quo* and break it, and become an alternative voice in Kosovo, not all of us were the same, not all of us believed in the same values as our parents. This doesn't mean that we created a political alternative at that time, but we created as I said, a space where we all felt equal, and we all felt free to discuss without prejudices, I hope, for each other and each other's experiences.

Aurela Kadriu: Were there reports about any murder that was committed at that time?

Garentina Kraja: Yes. When we grew up, there was the murder of Armend Daci. Armend...we knew Armend. He was a boy from Pristina. We all knew him. Maybe not personally, but we knew who he was. We knew his friends as well. And when Armend was murdered, it was one of us who was murdered in fact, and we saw that the war was near us, and the war was ours now. And that was, that number was issued with a black ribbon if I am not mistaken. We dedicated it to him, that edition, to Armend Daci. It's not that stuff didn't happen, or other murders weren't committed, but this touched us because it touched our community. And we were aware of the war, we were aware of how close it was, because actually now each of us was a target.

After this report about Armend, there was another report for a hand grenade which we found behind the offices of Post-pessimists. Our offices were where Strip Depot is located today, that is where the office of Post-pessimists was. And behind that office, if I am not mistaken, together with Jehona, we were looking behind and saw a hand grenade. Then that hand grenade, in fact the photography of it became the cover of *Koha Javore* [Weekly Time], with the same warning. Because we were collaborating with *Koha Javore* at that time. We became to be issued as an addition to it. Of course, we would collect the money in the same way because it had to be printed in order to be issued as a supplement, as a part, as an addition of *Koha*.

But I mean, nothing changed except the fact that we started becoming more *mainstream* [English], I mean from a leaflet that was distributed in coffee shops and schools, we began to be sold as part of a political magazine. And share our experience of thinking different...to give voice to our generation which wasn't the generation of our parents, but neither the generation of the editors of *Koha Javore* at that time. It was a completely new generation, to which we were giving voice through *Postpesimistat*, through their demands and expectations. And I mean these are two last events that I really remember from the newspaper.

I remember when we began to grow up, but also when the situation in Kosovo started getting worse, I remember Armend Daci and the founding of this unexploded grenade behind the offices of Post-pessimists in Pristina. We finished secondary school in '96, in fact in '97. In '96 the

communication with Albania became easier. I mean we were allowed to travel to Tirana with the Yugoslav passport. And since these circumstances changed, now my father was working at *Rilindja* in exile, we thought to reunite as a family. To go to live in Tirana after four years of being apart, apart from each other.

I went...we all went to Tirana. I mean we were all school-age, almost all the children in the family. I had to go there as a gymnasium student. Always with a *separation anxiety* [English] from Kosovo. I went. I went to the Sami Frashëri gymnasium in Tirana. A completely different world with completely different problems. With many stereotypes about Kosovo, many stereotypes about what was happening. As someone who was politically emancipated, it was difficult for me to understand that reality in the beginning, because the Albania which I grew up with was the Albania of my maternal uncle, the *TVSH* Albania. We thought of Albania in very romantic terms, as a resistance against Yugoslavia, which was imposed to my parents and to all of us. And I know that I experienced an extraordinary desperation...that night..

Personally, Post-pessimists taught me to understand the perspective of the other, otherwise I wasn't always open towards that perspective, partly because of the circumstances in which I was raised and the political charges that shaped me earlier than school or street could do so. They helped me understand the perspective of the other and helped me to be more politically emancipated and educated. Not for a moment did I have any dilemma about what was happening to Kosovo, and as I grew up, I understood how unstable the situation in which we were was.

I described something about Tirana, I mean when my illusions of Albania were broken. In '96, when we were, when our father met us at the border between Albania and Macedonia and we continued to Albania. I remember that I woke up late at night and we were near Durrës. I mean, the whole idea of the ideal and utopic Albania of my parents was broken in those ten minutes of that view of Durrës, dead. It's good, however, because of family unity and because of the need to be near our father, we decided to take that step and go to live in Albania.

The first year, the first semester was terribly difficult for me. I told you, because of the stereotypes that I faced at school. It is not that they didn't try to integrate me, it is not that I resisted to integrate, but that wasn't my natural habitat. In Kosovo I had my peers who felt like me, thought like me, maybe we experienced the same things collectively. Even if we had different opinions, we homogenized during those years in Kosovo. And I felt like I was detached from a natural part of mine. And of course, Post-pessimists were a very big part of this feeling.

And after a difficult semester in Tirana, especially with mathematics, oh God, and biology, but especially with mathematics, I returned to Kosovo and continued the second semester in Pristina, at the Xhevdet Doda gymnasium, I returned to my school. My sister and I...it was very... I am amazed with my parents. Today I have a five-year-old daughter and I think whether I would be able to abandon, not abandon, but allow my daughter to go and live in another place, which was more or less going toward the war, in the circumstances in which Kosovo was at the time. Probably not. I don't think I would have a heart to do it.

But my mother trusted us very much. And my father knew that somehow it was the turn of my generation to make a change in Kosovo. And they allowed me to come. And we lived, my sister and I lived in Ulpiana. Alone. We would go to Albania time after time. But my parents barely knew what I was engaged in. Especially after April 1, 1997. And they were in Tirana at a very difficult time of civil strife after the fall of pyramidal schemes. So, we were in Pristina and they were there. Two places at

war. In Albania there was a situation of civil war, while in Kosovo the Serbian repression was getting worse. So, none of us was in good places, none of us was safe. But I believe that one of the reason why our parents allowed us to go was exactly because they didn't exactly know what we would be exposed to.

[This part of the interview was conducted on May 17]

Part Three

Aurela Kadriu: Can you tell us a little about the nature of the activities of Post-pessimists?

Garentina Kraja: The activities expanded. First, they were more modest, I mean they mainly consisted of our meetings to consolidate the group. There are various ways in which the group was formed. Mainly we were all engaged, I mentioned Petrit, in bringing in other people we thought were leaders of their communities, good students or people who were active or engaged in school activities, be it from Sami Frashëri and Xhevdet Doda in that case.

First, we had group activities, meetings which we held within Post-pessimists as an organization. Then one of the first things we did was publishing a leaflet which then took the shape of a monthly newspaper, I mean we tried to issue *Postpesimistat* once a month, I guess. We had other activities. We often organized *dance parties* [English], but they weren't simply *dance parties*, it was a way to gather - a band of that time would play, people who played music, people from our generation who played music -, to gather and listen to them. And we organized activities about that.

Later, when things at Post-pessimists started becoming formal, when we started having a coordinator...we selected the coordinator who in fact coordinated various aspects of the organization. That is when we began to be more formal in organizing these activities and offering them beyond the framework of members of Post-pessimists. A consistent activity were travels abroad, in the shape of various meetings which we did within Post-pessimists, who came from other countries of former Yugoslavia. And these shaped our activity within Kosovo and abroad, always preparing to share our experiences with our peers from Bosnia, I remember them because they were in war at that time...

Then with our peers in Serbia, often not a pleasant experience for me. I don't remember having had anyone from Macedonia. Maybe. But the main thing is that these were two main groups and of course the group of Post-pessimists in Croatia who were also well-organized. When we travelled abroad, I mean, we had various workshops with people who sponsored our travels. They often were behind us as an organization, Norwegians, Norwegian organizations supported us financially, I mean, not the state...but humanitarian associations of activists who saw a value in the inter-ethnic dialogue within Yugoslavia. And these activities that took place abroad, they were, except the dialogue among groups, there were various trainings that attempted to create trust among different communities, among Post-pessimists of different countries.

Aurela Kadriu: Can you describe for us, were you part of any travel? These...

Garentina Kraja: Yes. I remember that I was in Austria, I was in Norway within the travels of Post-pessimists. We participated, after the program extended, we began to attend summer schools.

We went, I guess together with Jehona, we went to Crete within that summer school. There were three-four trips, that I remember clearly. They were, you know, seminars. I don't remember the details, there were many social aspects among the people, which made it possible for us to break...

Besides the fact that we talked about the reality in which we were living in Kosovo, these activities made it possible for us to see people beyond, to see people as humans...beyond the burden we all had for being Albanians, Serbs, Bosniaks at that time. I don't specifically remember what they were, except the debates that often ended up in tears...I don't remember other activities.

Aurela Kadriu: Do you remember the trips from Kosovo to another place?

Garentina Kraja: Yes, I remember, sometimes when we travelled, I mean very often, I guess we travelled by bus, but also by plane. When we travelled by plane, as far as I remember, we travelled through Belgrade. It was never a good experience. I mean, they often asked you, you know, we were afraid that they would interrogate us... "Why? Who are you? Why are you going? What is the aim of the visa?" And it always remains...I, the war was over 17 years ago and I still refuse to go to Belgrade and I don't ask for opportunities to go to Belgrade because I have bad experiences in Serbia when traveling, the fear, not that something specific happened to us, but I was mainly afraid.

Aurela Kadriu: What happened to you right after Post-pessimists?

Garentina Kraja: Post-pessimists...I mean, I don't remember myself divorcing from them, I don't know how I divorced from Post-pessimists, because maybe formally we weren't part of an organization anymore. We left room for the younger generation. But what I remember is that in 1996 when the communication with Albania was opened, my family saw it as an opportunity, I mean, my parents saw it as an opportunity for the family to reunite and go to live in Albania. This happened in 1996.

And at the end of the school year, we went there. To me this is really the separation from Post-pessimists. Why it didn't seem to me as a formal separation is because more or less Post-pessimists set my circle of friends, people I had and continue to have very close to me. It doesn't mean that we agree with each other, because we have chosen different paths, but however, they are the people with whom I continue being in touch, I continue being part of their happiness and sadness. So, I never felt like I separated...I separated from the activities of Post-pessimists, but not from such network.

And we went to Albania with our parents, with my brother and three of my sisters. We started living in Tirana. We started going to school. I was in secondary school. I mean, I began the fourth year in September in Tirana, with a big concern, with difficulties of integration in Albania. I have...The Albania we found in '96 was totally different from the one I had heard from my parents, maternal uncles and especially my mother. It was a totally different Albania. I remember the first contact was with Durrës, near Rinas. When we woke up, I mean, my father came and picked us up at the border with Macedonia, and when I woke and saw Durrës, there was nothing around it. It was like a desert.

And it was totally different from how we had imagined Albania, or how we saw Albania through the illegal antennas built in order to catch the signal of TVSH during the New Year's Eve program. It was totally different and that was very disappointing. Then Tirana, of course there was a small group of

Kosovars who were already in Tirana at the time, one of the people who was in Tirana at the same time with me was Zana Nixha, I mean, she was part of Post-pessimists in Pristina.

And we both ended up going to Sami Frashëri, to continue the fourth year of school in Tirana. We didn't happen to be in the same classroom. She was in another classroom but at the same school. To me, the integration in Albania was a little...because I went there with the idea that we are the same society, the same people, it was a big disappointment. The first semester was...it was difficult for me to make new friends even though the students were really good, but of course there were stereotypes among teachers. Of course, I had my own stereotypes as well, which I projected on them.

To me it didn't make sense that my Sociology teacher explained the situation in Kosovo as a situation of terrorism. That was the time when the clandestine and guerrilla activities in Kosovo had already started. And at the same time, I saw another aspect of Albania which I wasn't exposed to before. That was my Albanian language teacher who asked me to bring her books each time I came to Kosovo. The *Rilindja's* translation of Gabriel Garcia Marquez for example, literature of foreign authors which had been forbidden in Albania. And in '96 they were thirsty for such international literature.

And I used my father's library in Pristina each time I moved between Pristina and Tirana, to take books, the *Rilindja's* translations and send them to my Albanian language teacher. Of course, there were difficult moments, especially about language, the way I spoke and the way they spoke, it often happened that we didn't understand each other. And in general, this situation made me feel that I didn't want to be in Tirana. And I asked my father to return. I mean, we came for the New Year's, and I asked them [permission] to return to live in Pristina together with my sister, with Arzana.

We came, our parents allowed it. I...The situation in Pristina and Tirana was really the same, it was a chaotic situation. In Albania, the fall of the pyramid scheme had already begun at that time. Troubles were expected there too. Of course, nobody expected them to turn into a civil war in Albania. While in Kosovo it was clear. Attacks had just begun, bombs. Attacks, there was the attack against the Serbian rector of the University of Pristina.

Then there was a bomb that was thrown against the refugees coming from Knin, from Croatia, to Kosovo. But there were no victims, however these small guerrilla activities began in Pristina and other parts of Kosovo. Murders at the borders began, as well as arm confiscation. I mean we saw that something was about to happen. I mean, something was happening in both countries.

Back then, *Koha Javore*, where I had started working while still part of Post-pessimists, begun. I mean they started discussing for it to turn into a daily newspaper. This is the beginning, the end of '96, beginning of '97. Trainings of new journalists who would do the newspaper had begun. And considering that I was born in a family where my father was a journalist, I guess it was encouraging. I mean the fact that I saw the importance of media, but also the fact that I was growing up in a place that was going toward the war, I recognized the importance of the news. And, I followed it, I remember myself listening to the news since '89.

And I...I had no goal to become a journalist, that wasn't my professional call, I loved writing and news. It followed me all the time during my process of growing up. And I saw it as a good opportunity. A good opportunity to know, to report, to write, to continue writing, to continue interviewing people. First *Koha Ditore* [Daily Time] began with... we returned to Pristina. *Koha Ditore* began with...I

continued the second semester of my fourth year at the Xhevdet Doda gymnasium, I returned to my classroom after one semester.

It was a difficult return because they didn't recognize the semester that I had finished in Tirana, but because of the rigor of Xhevdet Doda I had to learn everything that they had done in the first semester. I had to learn, so that I would take the exams in the second semester. It was a difficult semester, considering that I had already begun my engagement with *Koha Ditore*. I didn't miss classes, no matter that I found a job, which was a rare thing in Kosovo at that time. I didn't...I continued, I went to school. And I gave the maximum to be, to continue being a good student.

I remember that Mikel Demaj was our math teacher at the time, and no matter the conditions, Mikel was a committed professor to make us all mathematicians. I remember myself with all the problems we had, with an unstable situation and you know...Mikel, I went to math class and tried to solve the problems in the book of Bogosloven, we had to solve problems. And this is how the fourth year finished.

I am telling you that I started working for *Koha Ditore* on April 1, '97. It was a similar environment, as a graduation from Post-pessimists, at *Koha*, I mean if a graduation from Post-pessimists ever happened, it did so at *Koha*. At *Koha Ditore* I was surrounded by more or less the same people who were at Post-pessimists, Fis [Abrashi], Ylber [Bajraktari], especially these two. Then I met Beni, Nebi Qena. And from [April] 1, in fact in the summer '97, he returned from England. I was already working, covering cultural events until late, until October of '97.

In October '97, or September, September-October, together with Beni, we started going to the field. This was to me...I, I am a child who grew up in Pristina, but I never, it is not that I didn't have a clue of how the other part of Kosovo lived, because my maternal uncles lived in the village. But they lived in a village of Dukagjin, people whose lands were very rich. I explained it earlier how they were persecuted, I mean...I had an idea of what happens in our villages. But, however, at my grandfather's, my maternal uncles', I didn't face the poverty that I did in September, '99 when I went to...

I mean September, '97 or October '97...in fact my editors at that time, the way *Koha* was structured, our editors were people whom we knew earlier. I mean from the same generation, Veton, Veton Surroi was the editor-in-chief of *Koha*. Our editors were Ylber Hysa, Baton Haxhiu, Dukagjin Gorani, Agron Bajrami. And a big part of making a newspaper was translating a lot. That is where we learned because it was *learning by doing* [English], I mean, we didn't have formal education.

I enrolled in the Faculty of Law with the hope that I would finish it. I went, the Faculty of Law at that time was a home-school in Velania. Yes, the structure, first it was a newspaper that took translations...it didn't have field journalists, it was being established. I mean, there were many correspondents in various villages and cities of Kosovo. And a group of youth who worked here in Pristina, untrained and politically unaffiliated journalists, people aiming to break the *status quo*. Now, I was talking about Stari Trg.

In September '97, it was the first time, I mean around that time, when we took the courage to go to the field and see how people of Kosovo live. And the first stop as I told you, was Stari Trg. I don't even know why we went there. Maybe we were attracted to know, because of the need to see how people live in a place that before...or that at least in our imagination it had economic importance, such as

Trepça. And when we went there, as people who didn't know much about international literature at that time, but as people who identified poverty with Migjen and his letters...Migjen helped us describe the situation we witnessed.

We went to Stari Trg in '97 and met families who measured their existence by the amount of flour and oil they had available. This to me was a reality that I didn't get to see in Pristina and that wasn't reflected in the back then newspaper, *Bujku*, or wasn't part of the discussions in Kosovo...at least not those in which I was present. It seemed that in Pristina we lived with the idea that we were all living in the same way, it was difficult for all of us.

In Pristina it was very difficult because however, the state apparatus was here, I mean, it was in Pristina, keeping the society under pressure. But economy wise, and in the sense of isolation, what I saw in Stari Trg was hard to explain. I mean, we sat with Beni, we returned. I remember that we didn't say a word on the way. We returned, he sat at the computer, I sat in front of him and we both wrote our versions of what we had seen in Stari Trg, and it was published under the title *Skamja e malit t'art* [The Poverty of the Golden Mountain].

You know, it was a cover story. It was the cover of *Koha Ditore*. That was my first article that went beyond cultural issues or interviews with various people of arts and culture in Pristina. And in that story, we tried to tell things the way we had seen them. To describe and bring to Pristina a hardly known reality at that time. There were, I mean, I wasn't aware of the importance that such an explanation would have in various cities of Kosovo.

I was surprised by how many people came to ask me after that story, "Do people really live like that?" Not that in Pristina, because I have to give you the context, not that things were better in Pristina, they weren't...but Pristina wasn't as isolated as the other parts of Kosovo. After this trip to Stari Trg with Beni, it sounds as if we went to another country, I mean the whole trip seemed like that because we had to go through many checkpoints in order to arrive there with one hundred fears. We returned with one hundred fears.

After that we continued with the idea, I mean to go and see what was happening. What was happening in the villages of Kosovo. What...are we aware of the situation Kosovo is in today? Because however, I must say, we were children, or at least I was a child who didn't want to stay loyal to the *status quo* created at that time. Without many ideas, maybe a little cynical about the situation in which we were living, waiting for change or a concrete action. Of course, the LDK took action with the peaceful movement in order to raise awareness, but after Dayton it was clear that we weren't even part of the international agenda, nor the American one, nor part of the agenda of any powerful country.

However, in *Bujku* and *Qendra Informativ e Kosovës* you always had news about recognitions and big decisions that were ahead of Kosovo, that Kosovo was in fact part of the international agenda. This was different from the reality we faced in Stari Trg, and later in Drenica, [the reality] of people who, in my opinion, had lost everything and didn't have anything left to lose. I mean, the only thing that had remained was surviving and their own life. That's it. I mean they had lost everything, they had no food and no dignity in many cases.

Where...Stari Trg was the first episode. The second episode was in Drenica. In the late '97 we went to Obri e Madhe, Obri e Madhe and Obri e Vogël. We went together with Beni and our colleague from

Koha at that time, Visar Kryeziu, a photographer. We went to a clay-built house. Seeing clay-built houses wasn't something new in Kosovo. A big part of the houses in Kosovo were built like that before the war. But this house was...the first snow had fallen and this house was...it looked so dramatic. A house without light, I mean with a very weak light inside, with a half-destroyed roof.

And we went inside. We asked the owner of the house whether we could go inside and talk to him. He allowed us to get in. But when we entered, what we saw was only one room. A room with bare walls...with a carpet, or with a very thin blanket on the floor. The floor was cold ground. And I remember a weak light, a weak lamp in that room. I mean, they had electricity. I remember a closet in the corner of the room, some pillows to sit on and a wood stove in the middle of the room.

And I...for the owner of the house, the father, I mean the head of the family it was very difficult to talk about the situation which we were already witnessing. From my experience in Stari Trg, I knew that it was easier for women to talk about the problems and the needs to survive, the barriers which they faced... especially to provide food for the family. And I asked, "Can you please tell me where your wife is? Can, does the mother of the children know, can we talk to her?" And he told me, "She went to the neighbor's, to my brother's." Because they were living in a family community, within the same property.

And he told the children. "Go call your mother." And instead of going out the door, they returned to the closet and opened it (cries). At that moment, their mother came out of the closet...she came and shook hands with me, Visar and Beni. We weren't able to ask her anything. We didn't know how to behave (cries) in those moments. Maybe the most difficult story. I mean, during the war we saw many things, but to me this remains one of the most difficult stories to tell, because that's where I saw, for me the loss of dignity and everything was reflected in that woman and her gesture.

I mean she didn't get inside the closet because she was afraid of us, she didn't get inside the closet because she had...I mean, the only reason, I still think about that woman, and I believe that one of the reasons why she hid there was connected to the situation in which we found them. I mean, the complete loss of human dignity. She was embarrassed about the situation, the poverty. And this for me was the warning that in Kosovo there is no turning back.

I mean, from this point on, in fact in that trip, if I am not mistaken it was around that time when we went to Drenica again. On our second time there, we slept in a mill, again in Obri, Beni, Visar and I. We went to look for the UÇK. Now, it was clear that the UÇK existed. We were told that from other people in the villages of Drenica, I mean they spoke in codes, with many difficulties. But, I mean, in our search for them we decided to sleep in order to build trust with people from Drenica, with people around which we didn't have, in fact this wasn't a random adventure for us, but we really wanted to know who they were and ask people from these villages.

Who was really the UÇK? Because if the UÇK only showed...this was the time when there were rumors that there were masked people in various villages, especially those in Drenica, who stopped people and asked them...They asked them, "Where are you going?" They were legitimate and would take their ID cards to show who they were. If I mean, they operated in that territory, the idea was to talk to ordinary people who have an idea about who they are and what are their goals.

So, in order to build trust, we slept that night in Obri. And of course, we met people, whom we later found out were part of the UÇK. They met us without masks. But at the same time, returning from another village and going to the other village, in Obri they stopped us in front of the mill. They stopped us, they were in a car and they came out of it. In uniforms, without masks, a group of people. And we were in the car with Adem Meta, Beni, Visar and I. And they came closer. We opened the window. They talked to us, “Who do you think you are?” How can we? Of course, in Albanian. They were dressed... I mean, the person who talked to us was wearing pants and camouflage on top.

And, “Who are you? Where are you going? How dare you? You are spies. You this and that...” We told them that we were journalists of *Koha Ditore*. Anyway, you know, with the explanation of who we were, of course, the local correspondent of *Koha* was with us, and he was a kind of reference because they knew him. He was from Drenica, Skënderaj. They started shouting at us, they started telling us that...their language got harsh. And in one moment, I turned to them and said, “You cannot talk to us like that. We have come here. How dare you? We passed the checkpoints. We did this. How do you know who I am? How do you know the sacrifices of my family?”

And for a moment, he stopped and listened to me (laughs). Beni and Visar didn’t say a word, Adem neither. They listened to me and told me, “Okay. You can go” (laughs). And I mean, this was the first confrontation with the UÇK. Later I found out that the person who stopped us, his nickname was Sandokan. After the war, I went to interview his wife, I mean, the wife of the deceased, because he died during the war, he was killed during the war. And other people who were around didn’t react, they let just him talk. After the exchange of words between me and him ended, we were free to go wherever we wanted in Drenica.

They no longer stopped us. The next day I went to Prekaz, together with Beni, Visar and Adem Meta. In Prekaz we were welcomed by Hamëz Jashari, I believed this is after the first attack. He was waiting for us in front of the door. We entered and he told us how the first attack had happened. He told us, he pointed to the tower, the water tower of the ammunition factory, it is still there, as a point where the attack came from. Then he told us, more or less we walked around the houses, and he told us what had happened that night. How the attack came, how there was no warning for it, how they were injured, I guess two girls from the family were injured in that attack.

And when he told me about the girls of the family, I asked him if I could go and talk to them. He followed me. I mean, I went without Beni and Visar, we went to the ground floor, where all the women of the family were. I stayed a little with them, so that I could ask them about that night. And when I went out of there, they invited us to go to the *oda*. When we went upstairs to the *oda*, the *oda* of Jasharaj, I don’t know, maybe memory cheats on us sometimes, but I have a visual memory of that moment, there were around one hundred pairs of shoes in front of the door. Maybe there were less, but to me it seemed like there were one hundred pairs of shoes.

And he invited us in. He said, “Get in the *oda*.” I was the only one hesitating. Beni and Visar didn’t hesitate at all. They wanted to go in. I said, “Can we not go in at all. Let’s return to Pristina.” Partly because on our way back we had to go through police checkpoints and I don’t know, maybe... (cries). We didn’t know what would really happen, what would be the size of the future attack in Prekaz. We were afraid, I personally was very afraid, maybe it was...as a journalist I wasn’t supposed to have such self censorship, but considering the circumstances, I didn’t want to know more than what I needed to know.

And I was afraid to go to that room, because of the people I would see and the chance to be stopped by the police on my way back to Pristina and be forced to give information about them. It didn't happen. I didn't enter the *oda*, but they also didn't stop us. We returned to the office. And when we returned to the office, we had another difficulty, how to tell about what we had seen? And we sat and tried to write in a way that wouldn't put them in danger, that wouldn't put the people we had met in Drenica in danger, but at the same time that makes it very clear that we met the UÇK.

And I remember it as if it was today, a photograph, because Visar...they didn't allow Visar to take many photographs in the beginning...but I know that Visar stopped and took a photograph in the snow. There was *UÇK* written on the snow. I mean, somebody had written UÇK on the snow. And that was more or less our way of telling our readers. Because of course, we always thought about the wellbeing, the personal wellbeing, the wellbeing of people whom we interviewed, but also the wellbeing of the newspaper, because we didn't want to the newspaper to be shut down. We wanted to keep it as an information tool, not to risk its closing. And the only way for us to tell the presence of the *UÇK* was through that photograph, where someone had written UÇK as a slogan on the snow. I mean, this was the first part.

On February 28, a little after that visit, Qirez took place. The murders in Qirez. We tried...I don't remember whether I was part of the team that went to Qirez. I wasn't in Qirez, but I was waiting for the photographs that came, that Visar brought to the news desk. Very terrible, I mean, photographs of executed people, mainly men, but there was also a pregnant woman. Then Prekaz took place one week after Qirez, on March 5, 1998.

On March 5, in fact we had mobile phones back then, I guess we had them. They were very exclusive...or I don't know whether we had mobile phones those days or Baton called us at Beni's home phone. Our editors had our phone numbers. It was very early in the morning, around five in the morning. And he told Beni, I mean, he told Beni, "I guess an attack has begun in Prekaz. Can you come to the office?" Beni called me. We went to the office and the others came as well. Fis and Ylber came.

For the whole day we tried to get closer to Prekaz to see what was happening, we tried various ways, be it using phone numbers we had, or international journalists. We couldn't manage. For three days during the siege of Prekaz, we didn't manage to get closer. They came...*Koha* at that time, *Koha Ditore* was like the foundation for everyone, an informative center in itself. Every foreign journalist would come there first, before starting their day, they would come to *Koha Ditore* to see what we had, what was happening in Kosovo. This because *Koha's* employees in the field were very credible and people who constantly kept the news desk updated with what was happening.

So, maybe we had the information before everyone else of where there were fights or where there were attacks in this case. So, at the same time, many of us as journalists, despite being journalists, it started becoming impossible for us to go to the field. So, we often went there with international teams of foreign televisions' journalists to serve as their translators. And when we returned, after being finished serving as translators, of course we were paid for that job, but we didn't do it because of the pay, when we returned to the newsdesk, we tried to write our stories.

I mean, that was the only way because as *Koha Ditore* we didn't have the resources that we needed in order to save ourselves. We didn't have bulletproof vests nor bulletproof cars, you know, and going to the field became dangerous for us as *Koha Ditore*. At that time, I mean, it was the time when the police started to come and take our editors in for informational conversations, they started asking them about the articles that were published in newspapers. And, I mean, we constantly had an idea...

We thought that thanks to the prominence that *Koha* had achieved for a short time, we would be a, how to say, using an English word, a *hub* [English] for the international media, we thought, at least I thought that it was the armor that saved us from the back then ruling power. An armor that saved us from Serbia. They didn't touch us, because the moment they would touch us, we would become the *headline* [English]. I mean, if one of our editors or editor-in-chiefs were beaten by the police, that would make an international headline. And we believed that it was our protective armor.

But also, the fact that we went as translators for international media, CBS, ABC, BBC, Reuters gave us, me personally, an armor behind which we could do our job. I mean we were there and we played two roles. We were *fixers* [English] and interpreters, I am not using the word translators because it was in fact an interpretation because we also had to give the context of what we were witnessing, and [we were] journalists. I mean there were two roles that we played during that period of time. Professionally, for me it was a school in itself. A journalist, I call myself an accidental journalist, in the sense that I loved the news, I loved writing, but I wasn't educated to do that job.

In our work in the field, in '98, '97, '98, '99, we got to work with the best journalists. International journalism, foreign correspondents had already an experience at that time which they had obtained in Bosnia, while reporting the war in Bosnia, so when they came to Kosovo, they were prepared for what was waiting for them. We were less prepared for what was ahead of us. In fact, what we saw in Drenica in '97, '98, for me was the beginning, or I'd rather say, the warning of what the war in Kosovo would look like.

It was...when we saw Prekaz and the ruins, the corpses in Qirez, it was obvious for us that this would be the flow of events in the upcoming year in Kosovo. The upcoming year, the year that was unfolding itself. Of course, reality was harsher than we had imagined it. Maybe this also... reality, between Pristina where life continued in a situation of repression and the countryside, where there were constantly attacks, and there were confrontations between the UÇK and Serbian forces, or there were guerrilla attacks, then the disproportionate revenge which didn't discriminate anyone, of Serbia against Albanian villages....

It was difficult to bring these two realities together in our heads and we often saw ourselves as the messengers of what was happening, almost the messengers of what was happening. We knew that maybe that was our last night with friends in a coffee shop in Santea. Maybe this is our last night with these people at Hani i Dy Robertëve. Maybe not many people were thinking the same thing, but because during the day we saw everything that was happening in the field, we returned to Pristina and people asked, "What is happening?" It was difficult to sit and tell them what was happening. Of course, we told them the newspaper, it wasn't a secret, but it was difficult to give people the news that what was actually coming looked very terrible.

Aurela Kadriu: How was your communication with the family during the time you were here?

Garentina Kraja: We talked a lot. I mean our mother often visited us. She tried to come every month to visit Arzana and me. Arzana continued school, while our mother came to meet us, she came and spent time with us. She travelled. We travelled too. We went to visit our parents as well as our sisters, two of our sisters and brother. This period, I mean '98, I remember the summer of '98, a big part of the summer of '98 when the offensive took place in Rahovec. At that time, I was in Albania and I couldn't wait to return to Kosovo because I wanted, I mean, I wanted to be here when these things happened, I wanted to report them.

I forgot to mention a very important aspect. Before the international media came to Kosovo, *Koha* established an information network in the shape of a newsletter [English], a digital newsletter in English, and a big part of our work was done there. I mean all the news we received from the field and the photographs were used to create a kind of digest [English] in the evening, which we shared, and then it continued. I mean, consider that here we are talking about '98, when internet was deeply limited. Very few people had email addresses, but we tried to share the news of what was happening in Kosovo with our capacities.

After '98, March '98, it was almost unnecessary because the main international media established their presence in Kosovo and Kosovo was never removed from the headlines, until June 12, '99.

Aurela Kadriu: How was, I mean, '99 for you?

Garentina Kraja: I mean, '98 was, '98 was constantly field – Pristina, field – Pristina and a little Albania. It was in October, October, '98 when the situation got better because the cease-fire began. But the cease-fire was actually a preparation for war from both sides. It was a preparation for war for the UÇK. It was a preparation for war for Serbia. Of course, at that time, there were the monitors of the OSCE in Kosovo, of the OSCE Verification Mission in Kosovo. And now, often, I mean until '90 [no], January 15, '99 we often saw our saviors in them. I mean, nothing big can happen here because the verifiers of the OSCE mission are present in the field.

On January 15, this situation changed. Of course, in this period people talked about an international conference on Kosovo. Kosovo was now separated, on one hand there were the activities of the *LDK* and those of the UÇK on the other. Both... there were tension between both of them. There were tensions at the local level. There were verbal tensions at the central level. There were figures who tried to achieve reconciliation between the two parties. But to us, I mean, as journalists, our eyes were in the field. What is happening in Kishnarekë? What is happening in Llap? In Llap, I am especially mentioning Llap because at that time, if there was a place where we saw the signs of a conventional war in Kosovo, it was Llap.

Because during the time of...the Verification Mission in Kosovo, their presence here, the UÇK had begun to open very deep *istikame*. Serbia continued bringing cars, I mean more sophisticated vehicles, armored vehicles. In fact, they started to slowly bring their army to war, to start a more conventional war. Let me tell you, no matter the fights in the field which continued being reported, for us this period, October-January, '98... {phone rings} sorry...which continued being reported, the priority was the international diplomacy around Kosovo..

I mean, if we go back to the covers of *Koha Ditore*, they tell that at that time we were dealing more with “What did Chris Hill say, as the American representative for Kosovo? What did Milošević say?

What did the UÇK say? What did the LDK say?" I mean, political events were more followed, without letting aside the...mainly the correspondents who followed events which we covered depending on the sporadic fights that...I am saying sporadic, because however the cease-fire was respected in this period.

I mean, this gave us the chance to move a little from the field and return to the political narrative of this whole thing. The questions which aimed to understand who the UÇK was continued during this period. "Who are these people? Where do they come from?" At that time, we started interviewing some of the UÇK commanders. And they started being more open to the media. I mean, we are talking about summer '98 until early '99, when we started finding out the names of their political representatives who started to articulate their political demands.

Then, on January 15, '99, the idea of the international presence was over because Raçak took place. And I went to Raçak two days after the massacre, when they gathered, when a big battle happened around the corpses. Beni was among the first journalists who went to Raçak. And, I mean when he returned, he returned together with Ylber, Baton, Alban Bujari, the photographer. They were terrified by what they had seen. Murdered civilians, shot, thrown in a trough. We reported on the event, we reported, all the international media reported on it, and this was viewed as the end, in fact, the beginning of the international attempts for a conference to create, to find a political solution because the war had begun again, I mean, it would escalate in Kosovo.

Part Four

Garentina Kraja: When I went to Raçak, there was a great battle for, for the corpses at that time. They wanted to take the corpses from Raçak, I think it was Danica Marinković, the Special Prosecutor of Serbia in Kos.. in fact of Kosovo, but from Serbia, he wanted to take the corpses from there. And at the same time, Finland had sent a forensic mission as an independent forensic mission to verify whether Raçak was a massacre or not, whether an execution of civilians happened there. I remember, I mean, people from the village, on the other side, the inhabitants of Raçak trying to bury the people who had been killed. Their corpses, the corpses of the people who, of all the people who were killed in Raçak, were lying in the mosque of the village. An extraordinary small village mosque.

And I was there, I witnessed the battle around the corpses, to take the corpses from Raçak, including the identification that children did of their fathers. One of the most difficult moments of that time. After that, it continued in Rambouillet, Rambouillet took place, the Paris Negotiations happened, with all the internal problems of the political class of Kosovo, the disagreements about who should lead the delegation and what they should sign and what not. Rambouillet was signed. I followed these events as much as I could and as much as my role in the newspaper allowed me, when I was assigned the task to follow them...

And they began, I mean they ordered the bombings on March 24, 1999. Now, when the order was given, I mean, we were...the same atmosphere that surrounded *Koha Ditore* during these two years of our common work was, we were strong advocates of the international military intervention in Kosovo, and one of the covers that was...I don't know, at that time we didn't work, there were no shifts from nine in the morning to five in the afternoon. At that time, we worked from nine in the morning, maybe we went to work at nine in the morning and got back home at around midnight or one in the morning

[of the following day]. When there was the need to, we even stayed the whole night at the office of *Koha Ditore*, translating documents which were parts of the negotiations in Rambouillet and Paris, trying to find out what was happening.

I remember that we received...I don't know in what form. Or it came as a proposal, or I don't know, it was something that circulated at that time in the *chat groups* [English]. A slogan that was designed by Fisnik Ismaili, known back then as *Kapadajja*. Fis is a member of Parliament from *Vetëvendosje!* in the Parliament of Kosovo. There was the logo of NATO and the slogan of Nike Air, *Just Do It* [English], and he had replaced Nike with NATO. This was the cover of *Koha Ditore* which I remember as one of the last covers that we did in the offices of *Koha Ditore*.

That night we were at the office. We heard that the order for the attacks was about to be given, and we kind of had an idea what these air strikes would look like, considering the experience of Bosnia. Many of us were very young when the bombings in Bosnia took place. But our idea was that it was a matter of 48 hours or if not 48, then 72, and the war would be over in 72 hours. We can go. We don't have to be in the office, or we will see each other the next day in the newsroom. Let's go home, and, "See you," you know, in a few days.

I mean, we went, we went to our homes that night, not having it clear, in fact, hoping that it was a matter of days before we met each other again. And in fact, a proof for that is the amount of food we prepared. There was food just for one week, no more, that we prepared, and this is an indication that we had no idea. We thought that it would be a very quick decision, with a quick effect and that they would return to the negotiating table and a solution would be found for Kosovo. That night...I, I mean, Arzana and I lived on the first floor in Ulpiana, in our parents' apartment...and we felt alone, we felt like it was very dangerous.

We were in a neighborhood that was inhabited by Serbs, most of them officials of MUP and SUP, in fact, in Pristina, [officials] of the police. And we decided to go and stay with Beni and his parents. And the first night, as far as I remember, we decided that maybe it wasn't safe to stay in Beni's apartment. We went to Dardania, to the rented apartment of Beni's sister and her husband, they also were fixers and interpreters for big international media. I guess Safet worked for ITN and Rebeka for NBC News, they were also people who were exposed to the field and saw what was happening during those two years in Kosovo.

We went, I mean Dardania looked like...since it wasn't an address in the last and first name of our parents, it wasn't easy to identify. Dardania as a neighborhood had many apartments. The apartments over [the commercial center] Kurriz. We thought that it was an area where we would be safer. And that is where we stayed for the following ten days. I mean, the first bombing happened at eight o'clock, when it, when, when, two-three minutes before eight o'clock, on March 24, we were in that apartment, being happy about it. We were very happy because the bombings were happening. And right after, right after the first bomb was heard...I don't know where the first bomb fell...I believe on the Military Barracks in Pristina, but it seemed as if it was farther. It seemed as if it fell somewhere in Sllatinë maybe.

After the first bomb, the electricity went off and they started breaking in every shop in Kurriz. And here we started to understand how this situation would look like in Pristina. The next day we understood, maybe in the morning, we had no dilemma, we knew that we couldn't go to work. It was clear. We

didn't need anyone to tell us. The telephone lines still worked in Pristina, and I know that we communicated with the correspondent of *Koha* in Brussels, with the correspondent of *Koha* in Berlin and they told us the international news. There were, satellites were still working. We could watch *Euronews* as well as *BBC* and *CNN*, and we realized that...

It was, I mean, one of the first news we received in the morning was that the offices of *Koha Ditore* were the first premises to be attacked in the city; that the lawyer of *Koha* and the best-known Kosovar lawyer, Bajram Kelmendi together with three of his sons, no, two of his sons, had been killed. And some days later we... Baton Haxhiu came over to our house. A little after he left the apartment where we were staying, we heard that he had been killed. He was dead, I mean, killed. There were various stories at that time that he was killed on his way to Bajram Kelmendi's funeral. Later they said that he wasn't going to Bajram Kelmendi's funeral, but to Fehmi Agani's.

I mean, in my imagination, knowing Baton, both of them were possible. I had the perception that yes, Baton would do something like that, yes Baton would go to the funeral, you know...and we heard that the security guard of *Koha Ditore* was killed that night (cries). *Baca Rexhë*. What happened after? They continued...I mean, those ten nights in the apartment in Dardania were extremely long. We couldn't, none of us could go out. I know that I took the card of *Koha Ditore* and cut it in pieces with scissors and threw it in the toilet in order to erase every trace of us as journalists and every other way of being identified with the newspaper.

Then we went to stay, after the bombings began to intensify, we moved to another place. We went to a basement in Dardania, with many other people. We went to Ariana's mother, to Ariana's parents, we stayed at their place, also in Dardania. We stayed at their place for one night. We watched the bombings from the balcony. Their apartment was on one of the higher floors. Ariana at that time was in Austria and then we returned to the apartment in Dardania again...unclear of what we wanted to do and how we wanted to continue. How the situation would develop.

The contact with our parents, we kept the contact as long as we had phones, yes...with our father who constantly knew where we were. Of course, we were under the supervision, Arzana and I were under the supervision of Beni's parents. Ten days later, we started seeing the queues. Maybe one week after the bombings, if I am not mistaken, we started seeing the queues of people coming from Bregu i Diellit, and Ulpiana, down Kurriz, led on both sides by Serbian police to go to the train station. And we were actually waiting for our turn.

As far as I remember, on April 3 they began to empty the apartments in Dardania, our building. And we prepared everything we had. At that time, we had two thousand Deutschmarks, all together. We embroidered them, Beni's mother embroidered them in various parts of our clothes with the idea that if the police stopped us, since Beni was of recruitment age, the age when he was able to fight, in case they stopped him on the way, we would save him. We would try to save him by giving money to the police. When we went outside the building, we were led in the same way, part of the crowd, part of the queue going to the train station, led by masked police.

You know, they were all masked. They had camouflage uniforms, blue uniforms, that is, special units of the police. We tried not to make eye contact with them. We walked toward the train station. And when we arrived at the train station, there wasn't...I mean, at that time we couldn't watch TV anymore because there was no electricity, we didn't have any phone. April 3...We didn't know how

many people were at the train station. There weren't many at the time we arrived there, because a big part of Pristina had been emptied already. It had been ethnically cleansed. We found out that many people, friends, relatives, had fled. They took their cars and drove toward Macedonia, a big part of them, and they were blocked on the highway, or on the road to Macedonia, to the border.

We got into the train, it was a feeling of fear and of course...in fact more for Beni than for me, Arzana, Bibi and Muharrem. More for them because they would take the boys back then and either execute them or imprison them somewhere...this was a trend which we had followed ourselves in the villages where the offensives had already happened and men were separated from women, and usually men were executed. An extraordinary fear for Beni, what would happen to Beni on all this journey.

We stopped in Ferizaj. A policeman looked at us, he was on the platform, the platform was empty. The whole Kosovo at that time, on April 3, seemed like a *ghost town* [English]. And when we arrived in Ferizaj, the train stopped at the platform. A policeman stared at us. He thought of coming in, but didn't do so. And then, the train didn't stop until Bllacë. When we stopped in Bllacë, there were policemen, before crossing to the no man's land between Macedonia and Kosovo, there were policemen. They told us to get outside the train and asked us to walk on the railway because the other part was mined (laughs).

We walked in a line of two, if I am not mistaken. We walked and ended up in a mountain full of people. At that time in Bllacë there were, I couldn't measure it with my eyes, but I guess there were one million people. In fact, there were around 30 thousand people who were gathered there, which Macedonia didn't allow to go out. We stayed in Bllacë for three nights. Beni's mother and father got out of the camp, they managed to get out of Bllacë, partly because Beni's father suffered from heart disease at that time. He had just gotten surgery, and they were transported by the Red Cross, they were removed from the camp. For us, after they left, it was a kind of relief because at the end of the day, we weren't in Kosovo anymore and we weren't directly endangered.

Now the chances were real that Macedonians could force us to return, but given the fact that we were in no man's land [English], we hoped that we weren't that endangered. A very unpleasant situation, terrible in fact, in Bllacë. We lacked food...but maybe not many of us thought about food, because it was a kind, we were all in a kind of *survival mode* [English]. We were all trying to be the first in line to get away from there, to go to Macedonia, to the other part. And after the third night in Bllacë, the next day they brought buses and emptied Bllacë. They sent people, they sent all of us to Stankovec, to the refugee camp.

Beni, Zana and I were in the camp. There we met Rron, the son of Beni's paternal uncle. And we ended in a refugee camp. During the day, our father travelled from Tirana to Macedonia. He thought that, when he saw neighbors and people, he thought that we were there too. We didn't communicate because we didn't have any means of communication. He guessed that we were in Macedonia. He came to Macedonia to try to use his connections to find out where we were and take us out of the camp. He managed to talk to the back then Minister of Information of Macedonia, he managed to ask him to come and take Arzana and me out of the camp. He took us out of the camp. Beni remained in the camp.

Beni was later taken out by a journalist of ABC whom I worked with, the producer of ABC whom he knew and he told him, "*I am Tina's boyfriend* [English], *Tina's boyfriend.*" And he gave him the tripod

and told him, “Here is the cap. Act as if you are our translator.” And he took him out of the camp. We met with Beni at the Holiday Inn in Skopje, and we both started working for ABC as translators and fixers of ABC. And for the three following months...In fact, I forgot to mention that when we got out of the camp, our father sent us, we met our father, he sent us to stay at his former colleague’s, a journalist, Selatin Xhezairi. We stayed at his place for a couple of nights. And after that, my father continued to Albania with Arzana. I continued staying with Beni, I stayed with Beni. I continued working as a fixer for ABC for three months in Skopje, to continue following the situation.

At that time, we found out that Baton was alive. And then a part of the team gathered in Skopje, and we started issuing the newspaper. We started, I continued translating for ABC but at the same time writing as much as I could for *Koha Ditore*. We lived together, after some time, we lived together with some colleagues. We gathered in Skopje and lived in one apartment. And on June 12, again with ABC, Beni on June 11, I on June 12, returned to Pristina after its liberation, after the Kumanovo Agreement was signed.

One of the first things we did was meet Veton, Veton Surroi and return to *Koha Ditore*’s news desk...to find Halo Trust, the agency or organization that was doing the demining in Kosovo. We looked for them, we found them and asked them whether they would be able to check *Koha Ditore* for *booby traps* [English], for potential mines. They entered, and together we checked and in fact from that moment on, we returned to work.

After we returned, of course I went to our apartment in Ulpiana, the apartment of my parents in Ulpiana. They had stolen most of the things that could be carried away, such as carpets, furniture, everything that was precious in their eyes. We found various slogans written on the wall, as messages to our brother. Of course, [written] by boys, by village Serbs. And, but, however, the war was over... We were very optimistic that the war was over and we returned to our houses. And in fact, we all had to begin from scratch, but it was all easy to handle since nobody from our family had died.

The first months, I mean ‘99 was very...the end of the war was very difficult because as journalists, we continued going to the field and seeing the consequences of war. I mean, for those three months that we hadn’t been in Kosovo, what had really happened? The first thing you noticed coming back to Kosovo was the smell. The terrible smell of corpses, dead cattle, burned houses. A smell that didn’t go away for that whole summer, I mean that whole month, the whole summer season. Of course, there were such...As a journalist, I was preoccupied with NATO, UÇK, demilitarization, how was the agreement for demilitarization developing. Other colleagues were covering the administration of UNMIK [United Nations Interim Mission in Kosovo], and their chance to create, in fact, their attempts to create inclusiveness, a, a, an inclusive board or committee in Kosovo before preparing the next elections.

There were difficult moments, especially when we had to deal with attacks that were committed against Serbs. Revenge attacks. And I am thankful to the *Koha* of that time for keeping a rational voice in that situation, [for being] among the only voice, and highly threatened in those circumstances, that rose above the situation that was created in Kosovo after the war, a situation of violence and revenge. I remember, Veton wrote an article which became very controversial. An editorial comment of his that became very controversial and not many people liked it, where he was asking people to stop revenge attacks, that this wasn’t the kind of Kosovo we all wished to build.

The roads, I mean after this, our roads were more or less separated. Colleagues started leaving *Koha* for better opportunities. Eventually, I was among them. In 2000... Actually, Ylber went to America. Fis started working for *Associated Press*. Beni and I continued being at *Koha*. Beni started working for *Koha* television. And in 2001, Fis went, he went to England to study and his position at *AP* became vacant. That was the moment of truth for me, whether I wanted to remain a journalist or do something else with myself. I hadn't finished my formal education and Kosovo seemed still important to me, important as a story. I wanted to have a more constructive articulation of my experience, I mean to show it somewhere where it would be more impactful and where I could create a career out of this accidental profession.

I started working for *Associated Press* when I was 22-23. I was their correspondent for Pristina and for seven years in a row, in fact for six years and a half, I covered various developments that were connected to the establishment of the international administration; NATO peacekeeping; the transformation of UÇK into TMK; the problems of TMK; the political status of Kosovo and its future. Yes, the first elections; the second elections; the March [2004] turmoil; the arrest of, in fact the indictment of Ramush, Ramush Haradinaj by The Hague Tribunal. I covered all of those developments until 2000...the negotiations in Vienna of the Kosovo Unity Team for Independence and the Ahtisaari's plan...I covered all of these as an active journalist for *Associated Press* which was a training in itself for me.

I mean, if at *Koha Ditore* I had troubles in objectively articulating my...to be objective because of the circumstances I found myself in, at *Associated Press* I learned that objectivity helps Kosovo and the society, but also me as an individual. I don't need...I mean it was an agency where I gave the facts, I verified them and tried to tell the context of events the way they happened. To me it was important to have a true information as well as a quick one, I mean to always be the first reaching the information. These were the principles upon which work at *AP* was built. It was of little importance what nationality you belong to, I belonged to, and this was very good for me professionally.

I mean, *AP* was another level of professionalism and profiling. There I found an extraordinary team of people who worked, who covered the war but now were leading the office of *Associated Press* in Kosovo. We continued. Fis returned in the meantime. We both continued working as *AP* correspondents. I started covering events in Macedonia and Albania when there was a need to do so. And so, this situation continued more or less until 2006.

In 2006, another phase came. What do I want to do with myself? My parents had already started working, they returned to their lives. They rebuilt their home...I mean we returned to normality after nine years. And the idea was, what now? I tried to return to the University of Pristina. It was very difficult for me. Partly because I knew people and they knew me, maybe also a lack of seriousness and maturity to return to my studies. It seemed like professionally I had more affinity with journalism than with a commitment to studying. I couldn't do both at the same time. But when things in my family started to relax, when my parents started having a stable income, and when we started seeing that the situation in Kosovo was getting calmer, that was maybe the only moment when I could think of myself.

I guess other people around me saw this situation better than I, and they helped me, they nominated me for a *fellowship* [English] at Yale, which I earned, and that is where the door opened for me to do something that I never could, which was to finish my studies and try to create a normality for myself. In 2006, as part of this *fellowship*, I went and was interested to find out whether I could return to

continue my studies or start from the beginning. Of course, enrolling in Yale was difficult with the level of education that I had obtained in Kosovo. Especially after a ten-year break.

When I say a ten-year break, I am talking about 2000...2007, 2006, 2006-2007. Math for me was almost nonexistent. I knew sum, division and multiplication, but not complicated mathematical operation which are needed in order to pass the SAT exams which are required in order to be accepted in prestigious Universities, I didn't have... those capabilities had disappeared and if...I mean, it always was difficult for me, but especially after a ten-year break, it was very difficult to go back to it. I mean, what should I do in order to improve my results of admission exams?

And I had to go back to math from the beginning, and I went, besides my work at AP and the seriousness of events in Kosovo in 2006, I went to math class every day, to math class, in order to learn math from the beginning. It was, I don't know, today I say maybe with these, maybe I would do it again...but then it seemed like a modest [sacrifice] in order to reach the goal I set for myself, to enroll in a prestigious University and return to normality. And maybe that was the best news from Kosovo after the war, when in 2007, in May 2007, I got the news that I was accepted at Yale.

At that time, I was facing big decisions. I was with Beni, I mean we were together at that time. We had already been together for ten years. What to do? To go or not to go? Should I leave a whole profession and start from scratch? What to do? And with the support of many people, *it takes a village* [English], maybe it takes a village to send a person to school. I went, I started my studies at Yale with a full scholarship. When I went there, I knew exactly what I wanted. I knew that I wanted to study Political Science, not because I had a clear idea of what I wanted to become later with those political studies, Political Science, but I wanted to try to turn my experience into something written. Something that would be a lesson for similar situations.

I don't know if I managed to do that, but after four years, I graduated Cum Laude from Yale University in Political Science, and during that time I was given the chance, I mean Yale had an opportunity for Political Science students if they wanted to take additional classes at the PhD level during those four years, or Master's level, and if they wanted to do a Master's. And I did that. So, within those four years, I tried to compensate what I felt had been forcibly taken from me.

What else? People often ask me, "How was education at Yale?" To me the first year meant real anxiety. I remember when I went to the class of Steven Smith, a philosopher, politician, Political Philosophy, and he asked the whole class, an auditorium of two hundred people, he asked them whether they knew the lines with which the Iliad begins? And I didn't know. I mean, it is not that we didn't read it in school, but after the long break in my education, of course I had no idea. But I hoped that I was in a setting where other people didn't know either, and this more or less describes how I felt that first year. When I turned my head and I saw everyone in the auditorium with their hands up (laughs). I mean, to me it was clear that in the upcoming year, I would have to lock myself in the Yale library and study, compensate everything that I couldn't learn during the formal and informal education in Kosovo.

And maybe that was the biggest difficulty or challenge of those years, I had to find a balance between my informal education, the formal education, my extraordinary life experience, my professional experience during the war in Kosovo and the transition and the academic seriousness of an academic institution, [I had] to balance my informal education and formal education. And I mean, of course I

went to school with people who were mainly, especially the first two years, ten years younger than I. And that was a specific shock. But it ended up well in the end.

After graduation, I returned to Kosovo. I didn't pretend, I didn't look for opportunities to remain in America. They didn't seem very attractive. I didn't have the big will to look for something to stay abroad. I wanted to return to Kosovo, to my family, especially to Beni. And when I returned, I started working for President Atifete Jahjaga, as her adviser, first as her adviser on security issues, then also on foreign policy. I worked for the President for five years, with various challenges. It was a difficult mandate. For those who are familiar with the current political situation in Kosovo, it was a year, those were years, five years of extreme polarization in the political scene of Kosovo, and of the impossibility, in fact, of big frustration...even though you are in a position where you think that being an *insider* [English], being inside, you can change, you can change things in Kosovo. You face demoralization when you see that you cannot do it. I mean, when you see how unimportant the individual is within a system.

To me it was, I mean, I was always curious to know whether it was important, it was more important for me to be inside the door of decision-making, or outside of it. Now I know both sides of this experience. I was very curious to know how it feels to be inside. I know. Now I know. And five years came to their end. I am very thankful. People ask me how I feel about the fact that I spent five years in the institutions of Kosovo. I went there with ideals...idealism, and I left with disappointment maybe, but with a disappointment for not being able to do more, but at the end of the day with a very valuable experience of those years of service.

Why was it like that. To me it was very important to work for a person who first wasn't part of political parties, and I never imagined myself as part of party structures where you must serve certain interests or political agendas. I thought that working for a President who comes from a totally different background, I can show my idealism for Kosovo at its best. Of course, it is very early for me to assess that period, that is why I will not talk much about this period, because it is still very fresh for me to be able to take lessons out of it.

Saying this, I mean it was over and that's it. I hope that one day I will be able to share certain moments of my work for Jahjaga, for her office, with the Jahjaga's staff, in order to...if for nothing else, at least to just let others know how those formative those years were for the state of Kosovo. What were the main challenges? Why did things happen the way they did? Why today are we witnessing a certain situation? But at the moment, I don't believe enough time has passed for me. I am, it's been only one year since I am not working there and it is difficult for me to give strict assessment for that time.

Aurela Kadriu: And, after that?

Garentina Kraja: And after that, yes. In December, in fact in September 2016, as I was working for Jahjaga, Beni had an opportunity for professional promotion. In the meantime, because I forgot to mention a very important moment, I became a mother in July 2012. Dalia's mother. Now, to me it was... during my whole life I was known as the daughter of Mehmet Kraja, the wife of Nebi Qena, now I have another label. Now I am Dalia's mother. So, I mean, Dalia, five years ago...I feel sorry because at the time I gave birth to Dalia, I was very engaged in the office of the President and I shared her growing up with other people. With the family, her nanny, Beni, but I wasn't with her one hundred percent of time.

So, when Beni was offered an opportunity for professional promotion as the AP supervising producer in Israel and Palestine, the Palestinian territories, that seemed as a good moment for me to take a break, to withdraw and return to Dalia as my priority, and at the same time help Beni, be his supporter. He was an extraordinary supporter of mine, especially during my school years. I don't believe I would have been able to graduate from Yale, and I don't believe I would have the calm or, no, calm is the wrong word because those years were everything else but calm. I don't believe that I would have... supporting pillars for those four years in Yale were...

There was a woman who was first a deputy director of the Yale World Fellows Program, Kel Ginsberg, who pushed me even in moments when I was giving up, when there were 24 hours left to submit the application to Yale. She asked me to finish the essay, the admission essay. Anna who, Anna Di Lellio who was with me at every step and maybe she was the person who understood best how difficult and how important it was for me to finish that chapter, and close that chapter. And of course, Beni who believed that I could finish (cries). I don't know what, I don't have anything else...

Aurela Kadriu: And then you moved to Jerusalem?

Garentina Kraja: Yes, we moved to Jerusalem. Now, Jerusalem. Jerusalem... I mean, I went to Jerusalem in December 2016. When the mandate of the President was almost over. I continued advising the President in my role, but from a distance. I continued writing her speeches, which was one of the things, I continued writing her speeches, which was one of my tasks. Not exclusively mine, but one of my tasks as part of her staff until April. In April when the President finished her mandate, I guess I came to Kosovo in June. I handed over my telephones and other things that remained with me from the mandate, and I officially closed my activity in the institutions of Kosovo.

And from that moment... I didn't have an easy year in Jerusalem. A very interesting place. It is very good that I am there to support Beni and pay more attention to Dalia. But personally it is a little difficult because I can see that it is another moment when I have to rediscover myself and what I want to do. And after one year in Jerusalem, I returned to Kosovo again for five months to lecture at AUK [American University in Kosovo]. As part... I wanted to lecture, not because I am good at it but because I thought that it could be a contribution that I can give back to Kosovo, be it because of my accumulated experience, but also because of the memory that I am afraid is being erased in Kosovo.

I mean, there is not, we have no reference about the past. We don't have many people who talk about the past. We all find it difficult to put the past, which we experienced as a generation, within the context of the current situation. And often, at the same time, teaching helps me move forward. Because I see how little reference has the new generation about the past. Maybe that makes them move forward without being burdened, without context. Maybe with knowledge, yes, I would like them to have more knowledge, but without being burdened by the idea that they should do things for the sake of an idea or idealism. And I am trying to encourage them to see what's around them.

Aurela Kadriu: What class did you lecture on at AUK?

Garentina Kraja: This semester, I lectured on two of them, *Faith and Globalization* [English] and Policies of Developing Countries. Both of them are topics that I am interested in from the professional point of view. I am trying to inspire the students and teach them as much as I can, mostly encourage them to look at what's around them. Their environment. To try to make them interested in what happens beyond Pristina. I believe, just as I believed in '98, that one of our main challenges remains a separation of the city from the rural part of Kosovo. We don't know our country well. We don't have...a part of our society has moved much forward while another part has remained backward and I believe that our development will depend on this...Not depend, but be interrupted by the separation between these two levels of our society.

Aurela Kadriu: If you don't have anything else to add, I would close the interview.

Garentina Kraja: That's it.

Aurela Kadriu: Thank you very much!

Garentina Kraja: Thank you!

