Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH JEHONA GJURGJEALA

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Present:

1. Jehona Gjurgjeala (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

Jehona Gjurgjeala: I am Jehona Gjurgjeala. I am the executive director of *TOKA* [Earth] non-governmental organization.

Aurela Kadriu: Jehona, can you talk to us about your early childhood memories? What do you remember from your childhood? Your family, your family background?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: (Smiles). I am laughing because my memory is very weak, so let's see what I remember. My mother is a doctor and she used to be a professor in the Faculty of Medicine. My father is an engineer and he worked since the opening, in fact, he was part of the team that began the construction and functionalization of Kosovo B, at *KEK.*[1] My parents are typical Yugoslav products. My grandfather became a teacher after World War II.

My father grew up in Prizren and went to school there, he was a very good student and got a scholarship to go to Zagreb to continue his studies. My mother studied in Pristina but she finished part of the specialization in Belgrade. I simply mean that they are a product of that Yugoslav dream that if you study hard, you will become a good professional. They were both employed. I mean it was the ideal with which they grew up, in the world of those best years, I mean the '60s, '70s, '80s. And when these things started happening in Yugoslavia, after the death of Tito and with the problems of the '80s, then the '90s, I guess my parents couldn't recover for ten years.

Because, for example, I grew up with a *video recorder* [English]. We had a camera with a film, we had a *video player*, I mean, we could watch movies with cassettes. We went to the sea on vacation. I went to English classes. I tried some other things as well but I wasn't very talented in dancing and music. But, I mean, we also grew up with books and everything else. I mean it was really, how to say, a typical, nuclear family. And suddenly, it all started being destroyed…

I remember when I was eleven, I don't remember much, but I remember some experiences. One of them was when I returned to school, I went to Dardania elementary school, and it was a big school. And of course, Albanian and Serbian classes were separate, but in the same building. And I returned

[1] *KEK, Korporata Energjetike e Kosovës*, Kosovo Energy Corporation.

after the winter break, and you can imagine, I don't remember what grade I was in…but however, I knew the school very well. And now you run upstairs and want to turn right to go to the other corridor and you suddenly see a wall that has been built during the break. And that was a kind of beginning of the separation between Serbs and Albanians.

They had taken half of the school and left us the other half. We were three times as many students. They had one shift. They had taken all the best chairs (laughs), desks and everything else, we on the other side had to manage somehow. When you are so little, it doesn't impress you much. Okay, the wall, you keep going and it doesn't influence you much. Then, I remember, another thing that I remember, and that is also something that didn't traumatize me but I remember it nevertheless, is that at the age of eleven I went to my first protest. There were some protests to which we would go with candles, and I remember, I still have a pink jacket with wax stains because of the candle that I was holding.

It was the same time when people would go to their windows and beat the tin, and this kind of activities of peaceful protesting. Something that I remember and that was traumatic for me, my mother was fired because she didn't sign the loyalty oath to the Serbian state. But somehow this was more merciful than what happened to my father. Because my mother was fired and okay, you overcome that, you manage to somehow move forward. She opened an ambulatory where she would give blood tests. But my father was demoted from an engineer under management to some position that he would describe, "As if going from a Mercedes to a *Fića*."[2] But besides the fact that he was moved to a post for which he wasn't qualified and had no experience or professional preparation, what was more terrible was the fear or the tension, or the insecurity that came with going to work every day.

Somehow, always at around 3:30PM, which was the time he would return home, we were anxious because we didn't know what kind of day it had been for him and what kind of energy he would return with. And you know how that influences the atmosphere within the family! And again, at that time maybe you don't notice it, but I...after some... because this lasted five-six years as long as I was there. It continued even more but I wasn't in Kosovo any longer. I only found out later that it was very terrorizing in a way. I don't know, maybe I can summarize it, it was interesting because they were really formed in a kind of phase, I mean, their youth and their formative years were in a kind of human idyll that was given by Yugoslavia at a certain time.

While my formative years, I mean from the age of eleven and further, were the opposite. There was a total destruction of what is right and what not, what is deserved and what not. Somehow, how to say, to me injustice was a fact of life. And they, as parents, would try, "Jehona, you know, be careful, because life is not fair, and difficult things happen." I was like, "Pff, for God's sake," I mean, "Yes, I know." And somehow also because it was difficult and many ways in which life changes in those circumstances are irrevocable. At least I didn't need to face the fact that life is unfair, you know, while they, I can say that five years after the war they couldn't accept what happened. It is sad to see…

[2] Zastava 750 type of car, a version of the Fiat 600.

Aurela Kadriu: You mentioned the wall at school. Can you tell us how did this affect your relationship with friends of Serbian nationality? To give us an idea of it…did you have a good relationship with them before that?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: Yes. Look, what I remember is that, now, we lived near the buildings of *KEK*. Each family that lived there, had someone employed at *KEK.* And around 25-30 percent of those in our building, were Serbs, more or less one Serbian family in each floor. It is not that we had such a friendship, but for example I remember I had a phase when I collected [decorative] napkins, and we exchanged them. I spoke Serbian and it was super easy to communicate and it was a very childish relationship, you wouldn't even think about who they were.

My parents never made a distinction or labelled of people based on their nationality, or between city or village people and this kind of things that used to exist and still exist. But definitely, at a certain moment, I don't remember it precisely, I only remember it that at some moment, somehow, we stopped hanging out with them… I am talking about the beginning. Then, the decorative napkins, I am talking about when I was eight or nine, which was in the late '80s, and then in the early '90s. And I entered the teenage years. Secondary school….at that point, we were more aware of ourselves, what we wanted, what we could do and what we couldn't do, because we were Albanians and it definitely influenced the…

Now again, since I understood that *life's not fair* [English]. It is not that I was holding grudges or something, I simply envied, definitely. There were some unwritten rules. I don't know, only later did I realize how we organized, how we moved, how we lived. Unsaid [rules], but we all lived according to the same rules. For example, I grew up in Dardania. I don't remember going beyond the *Goleshi* street, where the ABC cinema is located today, where the offices of Post-pessimists used to be. I didn't know what was beyond, *like* [English] at all, at all. To me, my city was Kurrizi, Dardania, Kurrizi. That is where we went out with our friends. Not beyond Kurrizi, there are some coffee shops of *Kurrizi*…near the *Tre Sheshirat, Tri Kapelat* there was *Xhani* [coffee shop].

And I mean, we would only go until Post-pessimists [office]. Otherwise, we were self-organized and self-limited in that space. I was in Xhevdet Doda gymnasium, which was also on that side of Pristina. The other thing was that we would never stay out after 11PM, while Serbs would go out even after 11… I mean, one of the reasons why I was so enthusiastic about Post-pessimists was because somehow you slowly start being more curious, wanting to explore, doing things, and you simply can't. You can't go to the library because you are an Albanian. You can't go to Boro dhe Ramizi, which was a cultural center, because you are an Albanian. You can't go to the swimming pool because you are an Albanian.

You know, when you start saying, you know, you don't have what to do with yourself. And of course, you have a kind of anger, but *life is not fair* [English] and you try to manage somehow. I read a lot. I had, for example, this was one of the consequences of living in a professional family, which was a product, a Yugoslav prototype. In my home, they read. My father plays chess. For example, there was

Politika [Politics], a daily newspaper written in Cyrillic which had a section on chess, and he would buy it for that. That is how I learned reading Cyrillic. So, later I could also buy books that were written in Cyrillic. Encyclopedias…there was a kind of youth magazine with curiosities about astronomy, psychology, everything. And these were accessible for me. So, I managed not to remain totally out. But however, there is a limit to what you can absorb, experience, and to what point you can develop only through reading. And all the other things were impossible for us.

Aurela Kadriu: I am interested in knowing, did the professors' discourse change after the wall was put inside the school?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: To be honest, I don't remember it. I was so little when the wall was put up, and I took it like, "Oh, okay," and I moved on, I don't remember.

Aurela Kadriu: Do you remember how the discourse was in the secondary school? Did it have nationalist shades?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: Pfff…Yes, yes, I don't even know…

Aurela Kadriu: …and the texts which you used in secondary school?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: To be honest, it is not that I have something, I mean, I don't remember any significant example. But we had our history teacher who would always…I think he was on the side of *Balli Kombëtar*[3] and he would always go into some philosophies of idealizing Albanians and their sacrifice, and everything else, as the most perfect and the best, most loyal nation and so on, it seemed banal even back then to me. Were there discussions about what Serbs are doing to us? There were, but it is not something to remember much. I remember it, you know how, when you have, this is the element which, when you have, I had it…

My first boyfriend was from Northern Ireland, and that is where I got to realize that people who grow up in *low intensity long term conflict* [English], I mean the conflicts that last long but aren't, it is not a war, there are no bombs falling from the sky every five minutes, they simply do whatever they can in order to live as well as they can. This is why these things happen… but I remember how I went to school and tried to do tactics in order to get all Fives.[4] Of course, there were cases when someone said something, but it is not that…. At least I didn't pay attention to it, that is why I don't remember. Except as I mentioned, Sahit, the history teacher who was a very good person, but had nationalistic tendencies.

Aurela Kadriu: Can you tell us about high school, how was it, a wide picture? How was it when you

[3] *Balli Kombëtar* (National Front) was an Albanian nationalist, anti-communist organization established in November 1942, an insurgency that fought against Nazi Germany and Yugoslav partisans. It was headed by Midhat Frashëri, and supported the unification of Albanian inhabited lands.

[4] Grade A on an A-F scale (Five-0)

went out at night, what about during the day? How did you gather, your activities? What did you do in high school?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: So, we felt very privileged because we were at Xhevdet Doda which was the only school in its own building, the way it was. And somehow, there were the best students there, from the best families, if I can say…Now I am talking again about something that however, created in us the feeling of community, you know. So as a teenager, you would experience friendship the way a teenager experiences it. You are only interested in your friendship, friendship, friendship. About school, I simply remember it as normal, right. Now, one has their own references of the normal, you know, somebody dictates and you write. To me, before Post-pessimists, the lack of opportunities to feed my curiosity, learn and try things because everything was so isolated, limited, was very difficult.

There was a young boy in the Catholic church, his name is Ilir Rodiqi. He is an architect. And he would gather a group of youth every Sunday, or whoever wanted to join. I mean, it wasn't, I don't even remember how I found out about it, but we would go there once a week and discuss. You know, there was nothing else, we would just go there and he would ask us questions like, "What do you think about The Beatles?" You know. And then you would discuss about that thing. And I am telling you, I mean, how primitive that was, and I absolutely went there regularly with a lot of pleasure, because just having someone asking you about something, and discussing with others was something, you know, valuable…

Then there was a youth newspaper, and I mean there, I mean…I even met Jeta [Xharra] there, working on the newspaper, photographs, articles, I don't know, this kind of things.

Aurela Kadriu: What newspaper?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: It was titled *Shpresa* [Hope]. What I want to say is that, I mean in the sense, how life was for us as teenagers, at school it was the way it was. You thought that everything was fine because you were going to Xhevdet Doda with good students in a good building. Teachers had good intentions in general. When I think about it now, some were less and some others more competent, but they had good intentions. You cannot judge them pedagogy-wise. The outside life was very difficult. The fact that you couldn't stay late, you didn't even know what was limited, as I said. You would even have *creepy* [English] moments. Very difficult ones.

Let me tell you about one case. It was...I was going down the street with some girlfriends, where the new church is now, in [the neighborhood of] Tri Kapelat, we were walking towards the underpass. Nothing, we were just walking and talking, and now, animated teenagers, la-la-la, and we were walking by a coffee shop. There were some chairs outside, and just as I was talking to my friends, you know, animated, I hear a voice saying, "*Hej, mala, tiše malo*," very aggressively, which in Serbian means, "You, girl, lower your volume." I turned my head, and I saw some, we called them *dizellasha*

[hooligans]. They were some young men who would dress alike. That was a profile of a *Barabbas*[5] at the time. And I turned and simply said, "*Izvini*" [I am sorry]. My first instinct was to apologize.

And I continued. And he was like, "Alright, I forgive you but don't bother me anymore." And we continued walking, and I still remember this after twenty years and I remember also that at that time, three-four steps later, I was like, "What forces me to apologize to someone, who is a resident of this city like me? This street belongs to me just like it belongs to him!" And I felt contempt for myself. Why was my instinct to get smaller and apologize? You know, simply feeling privileged because they allowed you to breath in your own city. It was difficult, it was difficult to the point that you stop and think, but human nature is, you know, such, that you make it look like flowers to yourself, otherwise, it is hard to survive, it is hard to go out of your home.

Aurela Kadriu: How was your relationship with other peers who were going to homeschooling while you were in the school building?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: I had some…at Post-pessimists there were some students of Sami Frashëri High School, but not many of them. We definitely were a little arrogant. I mean, I remember one girl who was in Sami Frashëri, a girl. I didn't like her much, not because she wasn't, I mean, not because she was in Sami Frashëri (laughs), but she was spoiled…I don't know, you should ask someone else who has more to say about this. But what I remember is that we really felt special for going to Xhevdet Doda.

Aurela Kadriu: How did you join Post-pessimists?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: How I remember it is that Petrit[6] came to each classroom. He had been to a youth conference where he convinced a Norwegian woman, Kristin,[7] to organize a conference, or a gathering of youth from the Balkans, from former Yugoslavia. And it seems like that was being done…And I remember that he went to every classroom, saying, "I need good students who speak English." And I happened to be in that classroom, Garentina[8] was in that classroom too. So, I guess that's how he gathered people from other classrooms as well. I don't know, this is what I remember, and then we started to gather. We would gather in homes for a pretty long time. And then it continued…

Aurela Kadriu: How would you describe the whole period in Post-pessimists*?* First the dynamics of events, activities within Post-pessimists*?*

Jehona Gjurgjeala: Post-pessimists were to me… they simply gave me life. I cannot describe the impact, besides what happened is that within Post-pessimists I met someone who found me a

[5] Barabbas is the criminal who gets freed by Pilates instead of Jesus, according to the Gospel. In popular culture it means someone who is bad.
[6] Find the interview with Petrit Selimi following this link: http://oralhistorykosovo.org/petrit-selimi/
[7] Find the story about Post-pessimists written by Krstin Eskeland following this link: http://oralhistorykosovo.org/the-story-of-post-pessimists-1993-2007-seen-from-my-perspective/
[8] Find the interview with Garentina Kraja following this link: http://oralhistorykosovo.org/garentina-kraja-2/

scholarship to go and study in England, which changed my life in that way…The time that I was part of Post-pessimists was amazing as far as the excitement of being surrounded by a group of youth who were just like me, intelligent, curious, energetic, without complexes, hungry for everything. At the same time, you felt part of something but challenged at the same time. It is not that I felt challenged, but it was very, very nourishing. Simply, I don't know, if I try to visualize it, it is like rays of energy exploding all around from a kind of drought reality.

I mean the first thing that I can say is that it was very energizing, bracing, hopeful… it gave you a goal, this was one. The other aspect was that it was extraordinarily useful education wise. I mean, things you didn't know you were learning, but that you were actually learning, to organize, coordinate, plan, find solution, everything. Among the things that you would learn, there were journalism, photography workshops, I mean this is how some things were. I was more involved in photography. You would conduct interviews… for example I have one copy of the newspaper where I conducted an interview with Ardit Gjebrea, as a 15-16-year-old.

And those things seem normal to you. Then, another very valuable thing was the opportunity to travel, and it was useful for two reasons. First, you could go out and see things at a very young age, this was very important, and the second, you had the chance to spend time with your peers from all the republics of former Yugoslavia. And, somehow you had the chance to see them in a very natural way, as people and as teenagers, just as yourself. And it helped not to allow yourself to create something that is an illness in the Balkans, which is that we alienate the others in the sense that, "They are Serbs, they are like that, Albanians are like that, Croats are like this."

And you realize that no, they are all human. And you know, it helped us remove stereotypes and some resistance towards knowing not only in regard with these former Yugoslav nations, but also when I went to England later where you face different races, cultures, it helped me to manage to be oriented in that setting and not remain like, "What?" As a close-minded person. So, it was absolutely transformative.

Aurela Kadriu: Can you describe us more details, if you remember the activities you did in Post-pessimists? The whole process, how did you do them, how did you experience them?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: Ah, I don't remember details, no. I can tell you elements that I remember when we were working in the newspaper. We had some meetings of the newsroom, we divided works, who would do what. The element that was definitely interesting, in the sense of journalism mentoring, and to simply learn how things are done, was the collaboration with *Koha Javore* [Weekly Time] back then. Because they were, how to say, our publisher, but also, I mean, journalists and editors from *Koha Javore* dealt with us. They edited our articles and gave us *feedback* [English].

We also spent free time together. That was interesting, because they were very interesting personalities, very diverse and very smart people. Yes, you could see what happens in the world of adults during a time when you were still little. They were, it was, how to say, lessons that were very useful for us to learn at a very young age…but you should ask someone who remember better. I don't

remember the mechanics of things.

Part Two

Aurela Kadriu: Jehona, do you remember the travels? Challenges you faced?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: I was, I don't remember, I remember three…to be honest I don't remember having difficult challenges. I am very curious as a nature, so when I know someone who I am not supposed to like because they are Serb for example, I am interested in knowing who they are and talk to them. So, I don't remember having any kind of aversion or big resistance toward anyone. Of course, there were, I remember there were heavy discussions. People hit tables, stood up, went out, but I remember them as very enriching experiences.

For example, one of the programs, camps, I was part of [was] in Austria. There are some photographs there where we learned how to take photographs and develop them in black and white with those various liquids and chemicals. And when you do that thing for example, now when I look at the photographs, there is a Croat, a Bosniak, a Serb in them and it looks very organic. I take it out of there, give it to her, he works on it { mimics the process of developing negative photographs}, I mean it was very transformative.

Aurela Kadriu: I know that there were Post-pessimists in other countries of the Balkans too. In which one you went, first, and did you have contacts with them? How was the contact with them?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: There were. There is still one in Subotica, I mean in Vojvodina, there is a group that is still active. There are Post-pessimists in almost every capital of former Yugoslavia. I mean there is one in Zagreb, Sarajevo, Belgrade, Subotica and here. There were no Macedonians or Slovenians, so, I guess, from these countries. Now are they still organized as Post-pessimists? I guess no, except some enthusiasts in Subotica who still have a *Facebook* page. I mean, they are people who went on with their own lives.

Aurela Kadriu: How was your contact with them back then?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: Look, different people had different contacts. I mean, there were love relationships between different groups. Most of the contacts I had were during the camp. I know that I have some letters from former participants who sent them to me. Of course, I sent them letters too, but in general it is not that I kept in touch with others much.

Aurela Kadriu: How did your life continue after Post-pessimists?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: Yes, a very interesting, so a non typical couple came to Post-pessimists once. An Englishman and an Englishwoman, both pensioners. They were Quakers. Quakers are a kind of protestant denomination, they are pacifists, they are really, you know, pacifists. They believe in equality and are very vocal about humanity. And they had a very antique Land Rover and they decided

that they didn't want to stay in England, but they wanted to travel around former Yugoslavia and do *reconciliation* [English] activities with youth. And I don't know how they arrived to our office, but they came and did some activities. They were very childish activities to us because we grew up very quickly. The kind of activities, I don't know, kneeling, holding hands and then standing up shouting *love* [English], we did them because they were our guests and we wanted to make them feel good.

We laughed during those activities, but however, the couple was really cute. And exactly Garentina, Ariana and I sent them to a coffee shop called Punto. Right under this building, we sent them to have a drink, coffee, tea, I don't know. And during the conversation, we sent them there as a sign of acknowledgement, and we were talking about the circumstances, how school was catastrophic, how the faculty was in houses, how weak the perspective was. And in one moment, without any agenda, she said, "I will write to Quakers schools in England and I will try to find you scholarships to go there to study." And we were all like, "Okay, *nice* [English], thank you!" But again, "This can never happen," you know.

But to be honest, the woman kept her promise. And I mean, there are some private schools that were founded 200-300 years ago in England, and that become to that denomination and she wrote to those schools. And one of them offered a scholarship, and I was the person who kept in touch with her. And I had maternal uncles of my mother in London who could be a *guardian* [English] because someone to whom you could go on holiday was necessary. And I went. I went there within one week. I only received the message, "You have the scholarship, go!" I even remember that I was in Greece, with a program of Post-pessimists when my mother called me and she told me what happened.

I returned to Pristina in two or three days. I went to Belgrade to get the visa. I gave the paper to the woman in the Embassy, and she went to the back to check it. I remember I felt relieved when she returned because everything seemed like a dream, you know. The moment she returned, I said, "Ok, the school exists." Because we had no internet back then, we couldn't find out about these things. Literally, you know, I wondered within myself, where was I going? And I got the visa. And my life changed completely in one week. I went to a school which was a school for girls. I lived there, studied, ate and drank. It was a total cultural shock, but it continued like that…

Aurela Kadriu: How was it there, do you remember school, besides the fact that you lived with girls, and…?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: I remember school. It was very good and very difficult in some fields…I was very, very poor. I talked to my parents once a week for five minutes, every Sunday. And we had so little money, that I didn't return to Kosovo for one year. And being 17 years old, in a situation where you have never been abroad, you haven't lived far from the family for longer than ten days, not returning for one year…Only later did I realize that it was really difficult, but that's how it was. I had a pair of jeans and a pair of shoes for two years. I died them every six months. There are some boxes with dies, you put them in the washing machine and the jeans become like new, and…

School was very easy because they make it so. First, there are only six-seven people in a classroom.

There is discussion, it is challenging and friendly, but you know, for example, in Sociology class we would talk about sects by watching a movie, a sect that worships snakes, now of course it is easier for one to learn something when it is easily introduced. So, school never seemed difficult to me. But the moment I arrived, I had decided that I wanted to stay there for my University studies, but in order to do that, I had to find over fifty thousand euros to pay for three years of my studies.

Aurela Kadriu: Ehem…can we stay a little, in which year did you go to London?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: '96.

Aurela Kadriu: Did you come back for holidays after the first year? Did you come to Pristina on holidays?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: Yes.

Aurela Kadriu: Can you describe that period, how was it when you came from London to Pristina?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: I mean, '96, '97. Summer. Look, it is not that I remember the summer of '97 much. I definitely remember the summer of '98 because I had already finished the first year of my studies. I returned thinking, "OK, I will go to have fun, spend the summer in Pristina." And when I arrived here, the war had already begun, I mean, internal fightings in Drenica. And Garentina, for example, Fis, I mean and everyone else who was part of the Post-pessimists friendship had started going to the field either as journalists or *fixers*, as they were called, for foreign journalists. And after four-five days of being in Pristina, I said that I couldn't stay in Pristina and drink beer when there is something like that happening only thirty kilometers from here.

And I had decided that I too, wanted to go and do something like that. I convinced Baton Haxhiu[9] to take me once, because I thought within myself, if I go to the BBC and tell them that I can be a fixer without ever being in the field, without ever seeing the countryside…Because my whole family comes from Prizren, so I never had a chance to know rural Kosovo, I thought they would laugh at me. I called Baton Haxhiu, I said, "I want to go to the field, will you take me?" I was 19. "Are you sure?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Come." And so, I went there with Baton for two-three weeks and I wrote for *Koha Ditore* [Daily Times]. And then I started working with foreigners, I continued for that whole summer, which was the most bizarre summer of my life.

Aurela Kadriu: Can you describe it for us?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: Oh…it was very, very out…You would wake up in the morning and get in an armored car, sometimes not even armored, and you would take off. You would usually have an idea of where you were heading, but you never knew how many *checkpoints* [English] would be on the way. You wouldn't know whether they would happen to be Serbs or Albanians. Whether the Albanians

[9] Baton Haxhiu (1967), journalist, former editor of *Koha Ditore*, after the war editor-in-chief of the daily *Express*, owner and managing editor of Klan TV.

would turn out to be someone from the provinces , what do I know, someone from the provinces l who found a gun and became a boss now, or whether you would happen to meet the real *UÇK.*[10] It could happen that you meet the *UÇK* in the morning and the Serbs in the afternoon {drinks water}. Or vice-versa. There would be cases when you would reach the Serbian *checkpoint* and see them drunk. With their guns and so on, and it all seemed normal to you. And I mean, now, you would do all this…

For example, some aspects that I remember, there was once, I got the information that there was an improvised hospital which was a house with no doors or windows, nothing, only concrete. But a safe space in which a hospital was improvised. And I don't remember which journalist I was with, but we took off like that. And in one of the *checkpoints* I faced Fehmi Lladrovci.[11] And he was very aggressive. No, I don't know, something had happened and he was very, "You journalists, you only take care of your asses, you are not doing anything for us." And you know, "Bloodsuckers." He didn't have a problem with me, but he was…and I remember his case and many other cases negotiating, you know, saying, "Slow down. Don't you think people should know of this, how do you think you can solve this problem on your own? Do you think we can help?"

"People should know that there is an injured child there and so on," and so he was convinced and allowed us to go. And we went to that hospital. *Ku-ku,*[12] my God, I will never forget that. There was a seven or eight years old boy, lying on plastic bags, literally, with catheters… but not straight from, it was connected, I guess through the kidneys and he was just staying like this {explains with gestures the boy lying}. Terrible! I mean, there was every kind of things there. And you would take the stills, interview, return to the city. If it was a video-report, you would help with translation and so on. Then you would go out for a beer. At that time, we would hang out at a coffee shop in Dardania, that's where all the journalists, *fixers* [English] would gather, and we would share the information about what was happening in the field. There were journalists, I wasn't among them, but there were journalists who would send messages from Pristina to the ground and vice-versa with *UÇK*.

And like that, we would stay there until 11PM and then go home to sleep. The next day we would wake up and go there again. We never knew what would happen to us. There was, I mean, this was one of the most difficult days. There was another day when I went to Likovc with two journalists. Serbs had a tactic, first they would go and bomb the village from farther, the village would empty, then they would kick in. We went to Likovc, which was one of the *UÇK* headquarters and conducted an interview with *Gjarpni* [The Snake] and with *Sulltan* [The Sultan].[13] I only found out after the war that *Gjarpni* was Hashim Thaçi.[14] When the name Hashim Thaçi came out, I was like, "Who is this Hashim Thaçi *more*, how come he is going to Rambouillet?"[15] When I saw a photograph of his, I said, "Aaah, this is *Gjarpni* (laughs)."

And I went there with two journalists. There was an American and an English journalist. We stayed

[10] *UÇK, Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës,* Kosovo Liberation Army.
[11] Fehmi Ladrovci (1950-1998) was a political prisoner and early KLA fighter who was killed during a shootout with Serbian forces together with his wife Xheva Krasniqi Lladrovci (1955-1998), a political activist in the *Ilegalja* nationalist movement and KLA fighter.
[12] Colloquial, expresses disbelief, distress, or wonder, depending on the context.
[13] Syleiman Selimi, military commander of the KLA.
[14] Hashim Thaçi (1968-), KLA leader at the 1999 Conference of Rambouillet, founder and leader of the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), served as Prime Minister several times and in 2016 was elected President of Kosovo.
[15] The Conference of Rambouillet (Paris) in February 1999 was the last, failed effort to negotiate a peace between Milošević and the KLA.

until late, it was something *like scoop* [English]. And we conducted the interview, we could hear it coming closer and closer. I mean, the grenades came closer and closer. And when we took off, it started getting dark. It was dusk and we had a non-armored jeep, green, which is a total stupidity because you cannot go with a car that looks like a military car. It was very *weird* [English], because now we are driving, it is becoming dark, we are trying, we are rushing. I was on the front, one of them was in the back and the other one was driving. The one sitting on the backseat panicked, "I see a soldier here, I see a soldier there, they will kill us, our color, oh my God, oh my God, oh my God," the man was totally lost, totally lost.

And I couldn't believe it because he was a journalist of a prestigious English newspaper, part of the *foreign desk* [English]. I couldn't believe how he panicked so much, when his job was to go to such places. And the other journalist and I would just stare at each other, "What do we do to him, what do we do to him?" At some point I had enough, I turned at him and said, *"Peter, we're here, we have to get out of here, there's no point in panicking, because it doesn't make it any better, so just calm down"* (laughs). I guess when he saw such a little girl comforting him, he was embarrassed and shut up. He only said, *"Ok, but I am not a happy bunny."* (laughs)

I said, "We don't care." *Anyway* [English], this was one of, this was…there were many moments like this. There was, we went, we were among the first teams that entered Rahovec after it was burned.[16] It was still burning, it was still burning. That was very, that was very difficult because there were all, but this was, they were burning the houses and they let us enter. All of a sudden they said, "Be careful because there are still snipers…"

Aurela Kadriu: Were they Serbs or Albanians?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: Yes, yes, the [Serbian] police had defeated the *UÇK*…and we were going to a *teqe,*[17] we drove, we drove and stopped the car. There was a moment when we were supposed to get out of the car, and it was a moment like, "Oh my God!" you know, I will be shot by a bullet from somewhere. But anyway, I am here, I wasn't shot, *whatever* [English], there are such…

Aurela Kadriu: After how long did you return to London then?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: This was my summer, (laughs), you know when you return to school, "How was your summer?" This is how I spent the summer.

Aurela Kadriu: Was it traumatic returning to London?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: No, the next year, '99, was more traumatic, I wasn't here at that time. I was in London, studying and of course when my parents went to Macedonia and so on…

Aurela Kadriu: How did the transition between high school and university happen, at that time…you have told me before about the difficulties you faced?

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[16] In July 1998, Serbian police regained control of Rahovec after a KLA offensive and many civilians were killed in the aftermath. See Human Rights Watch, *Under Order* (2001).

[17] *Teqe* in Albanian, *tekke* in Turkish, is a lodge of a Sufi order, in this case the Bektashi. It is inhabited by a Cheikh or *Baba* and by dervishes.

Jehona Gjurgjeala: Yes, but I don't know whether they are interesting. I decided that I didn't want to apply for asylum, even though I was able to and I would have free schooling, but I was disgusted with what Albanians were doing at that time. I mean, they abused the social system in England and I couldn't see myself as part of that group. Plus, you couldn't return until you got the documents. But the first was the main reason, and nothing…I suffered, I mean I suffered a lot until I found the money. Then the war exploded and it made it even more difficult. I don't know if you ask me now to collect fifty thousand euros…it doesn't cost fifty thousand euros now, it costs eighty thousand…but, I mean, find the money and make it. I wouldn't know where to start.

Aurela Kadriu: Did you communicate with your family? Was your family in Pristina during the war time while you were in London?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: Yes, they were in Pristina for the first week then they went to Macedonia.

Aurela Kadriu: Did you ever communicate with them, how was the situation?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: Yes yes, as long as they were in Pristina, we would communicate daily, but how to say, typical family stories, "We don't tell." I asked, "How are you?" "We are fine, fine, fine." The next day, "Your mother went to Macedonia. And I will go tomorrow." From my father…

Aurela Kadriu: Did you return in the summer of '99?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: Yes, yes, (laughs), I am laughing because my parents were in Macedonia, and I arrived in Macedonia from London. But they were still collecting the stuff from their three-months refugee life. And they said, "You go first, because we are hearing that they are breaking the apartments and occupying them, you go and defend it." I am laughing because the idea that I could defend something is very comic, but I left like that, of course. And I had no clue of how it was. But I returned. It was around seventh or eighth day after, June 19 or 18. A total desert. Very few people, almost nothing at all… I don't know. That is where I realized that it was a totally different life, because I went from Dardania to Bregu i Diellit at a friend's whose family had stayed in Pristina during the war.

And I walked, I was crossing the road near the students canteen, the dormitories…A car was driving very fast. And you know, "What a chick!" And I returned and did like this {raises her middle finger} and didn't think about that at all. I continued walking and all of a sudden, I saw the car returning to the parking lot where I was walking. Pointing his finger towards me, and I only realized then that he had been following me because I had offended this owner of the house, whoever he was. I started running to a staircase where the car couldn't go. That is where I realized that it was a totally different world, you know, and the idea that I could defend the house was a joke…

Aurela Kadriu: How did you find the house?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: Stolen, it was stolen. I mean, nothing worth mentioning.

Aurela Kadriu: Then did your family return after that or what happened?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: Yes, they returned. I am trying to remember, I guess my father returned very

quickly. My mother was teaching at the Faculty of Medicine in the parallel system.[18] I was working for the British Embassy. I was still in my studies, so I was here only for the summer. The first summer I worked for the British Embassy and the British KFOR. Then I finished my faculty and returned.

Aurela Kadriu: What did you do when you returned?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: I worked for a local organization. And then an international one, I worked for NGOs mainly. I had studied Political Science, and I had studied Political Science because from Post-pessimists I was infected with the idea of doing social changes, doing something for the society, because before that, I wanted to become a doctor, like my mother. So, I studied Political Science and I thought things could change through NGOs. I worked for two NGOs, and it was a pretty disgusting period, because there was a lot of money and there was a lot of materialism and to me, all that was so hypocritical that I decided to leave because I couldn't stand it. Then I went for my Master's, and so on.

Aurela Kadriu: You went back to London for your Master's, then you returned again, from a whole different life?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: I returned, and how to say, I used the elimination process, if you want to influence the society, what are your chances? Local organizations? No. International organizations? Ehee… Political parties? This was the next experiment, and I mean, it was a lesson. They were all good lessons. This was one of them. And that is where I decided, I mean, in ORA,[19] I learned three very important things. This is in 2005, 2004, yes, 2005. Kosovo will become worse before becoming better; if you want to do something in Kosovo, your tail should not be caught and three, the chance of the generation, the last chance of the generation of, I am talking about Veton Surroi[20] and so on, is not enough.

And that was the reason why I took the decision to go to the West, to free my tail. My tail wasn't caught because I was too young to be important, but I realized that if you are not careful, in Kosovo they put you in a very territorial space, everybody wants to have their own clan, tribe, territory. And if you want to do what you think should be done, you don't dare and remain under anyone's mercy. And that is why I went abroad, created experience, an experience which makes it possible for me to return to the West whenever I want to. I took the British citizenship and I bought an apartment with some poor savings.

Aurela Kadriu: And then when you returned to Kosovo?

Jehona Gjurgjeala: For me it is very OK, because I took the lesson out of all these experiences of mine.

Aurela Kadriu: What did you do when you returned?

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

[19] Founded in 2004, Reformist Party ORA (Hour) was a social democratic centre-left political party in Kosovo. After failing to reach the threshold in the 2007 elections, ORA decided to dissolve as a political entity in February 2010.

[20] Veton Surroi (1961) is a Kosovo Albanian publicist, politician and former journalist. Surroi is the founder and former leader of the ORA political party, and was a member of Kosovo Assembly from 2004 to 2008.

Jehona Gjurgjeala: Now…

Aurela Kadriu: What are you doing now?

Jehona Gjurgjeala:…I mean, my last return was two years and a half ago. I had decided. I had many experiences after Post-pessimists, where from my personal experiences and others', I realized that working with youth, non-formal education, youth empowerment, was a powerful observatory. I had the idea of returning already three years before I did, and this was what I wanted to do. I mean, to work with youth, invest in their emancipation and education, motivate them to help others.

Then, how was it shaped… I had, I mean, I knew that I wanted to do non-formal education which is entertaining, socializing, diverse and I started the first project. For the first six months, I was alone, I mean I didn't pay myself because I didn't have money. I mean, when you start an organization from scratch, which is not founded by the Norwegian Embassy nor the American one, or whichever institution, you cannot pay yourself, you only keep moving.

Aurela Kadriu: If you don't have anything to add, I believe we can conclude it now. Thank you!

Jehona Gjurgjeala: OK, thank you!