

INTERVIEW WITH DORUNTINA BASHA

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Duration: 34 minutes

Present:

1. Doruntina Basha (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.

Doruntina Basha: I am Doruntina Basha, I am a dramaturg, screenwriter. I was born in 1981 in Pristina and grew up in the Dardania neighborhood in Pristina. I spend a major part of my childhood in the city center, specifically in the area where Radio Pristina is located now. I mean, in that neighborhood. In fact, where Radio Pristina used to be located, that is where my grandmother used to live and where my maternal aunt lives currently.

And when I recall my childhood in Pristina, growing up in Pristina, I have a shared memory in these two neighborhoods, in Dardania and the city center. The reason why I recall my childhood only in these two neighborhoods and not in any other is simply because my family, my parents and my sister lived in Dardania, and I went to school at the Dardania elementary school, which in the beginning used to be Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, then it turned into the Dardania elementary school.

Regarding social life, socialization, my main memories are connected with the *mahalla*¹ of my grandmother. What can I specify, one that is the most vivid memory from my childhood is the Dardania elementary school. When I enrolled in that school, my sister was already going there, she is six years older than me. When I enrolled in the first grade, my sister was in the seventh or eighth grade.

I enrolled in 1988, and at that time, the school had a prestige in the city because, at that time, it was the newest school in the city, as well as the biggest and the most modern one. So, I was very happy to go to school, and I was very proud that I enrolled in such a school with such a reputation. The school was really new, big, it was very special. But the political situation turned out very differently shortly. In fact, it didn't really change, it just got worse, and the school experienced that change also physically. All of a sudden, from a very positive experience it turned into a...I don't know, an experience of isolation, to be absolutely honest.

What happened is that, in 1990, when most Albanians were expelled from their workplaces, when in fact the violent measures closed the schools for Albanians as well, I mean, Dardania kept being open, I mean, Albanian classes continued, but the school was divided in half by a wall. A wall was erected in the middle of the school, in order to divide Serbian classes from the Albanian ones.

One of the memories that will never be erased from my memory is this wall and the first day of the third grade in September when I went to school and saw this wall in the middle of the school. It was a very strange perception of an environment I had already gotten used to, in which I had been for two

¹ Word of Arabic origin that means neighborhood.

years already, corridors that I already knew. Dardania school has a different structure, it has more elaborate corridors, and now the space where we were allowed to move was limited and divided.

What was characteristic about it is that the school was divided in two, and it gave you the idea that it was proportionally divided, but taking into consideration the fact that there were a lot fewer Serbian classes than Albanian ones, it means that the biggest part of the school belonged to Serbian students. Of course, the sports hall was on their side, and we didn't have a sports hall.

Since the number of Albanian students was bigger, we had to improvise classrooms in the corridor with various alternative materials, we had to organize small classrooms. My classroom from the third grade was an improvised one in the corridor, its walls were made out of plywood, there were desks. We were 34-35 students, I don't exactly know, but it was very crowded inside because the desks were too close to each other, and it generally created a feeling of claustrophobia because it simply didn't meet the standards, or the classroom simply wasn't the same as we were used to.

As for the atmosphere that was created, I remember the physical division of the school and the organizing. From being a school that continues having a very great name, a big school that had entrances from many sides, suddenly the yard was inaccessible, even though there was no physical division in the yard but simply an invisible border was set which, as an Albanian student, you didn't dare and step on, it was like...the division simply took place.

In general, a very unpleasant atmosphere and state of fear were created. We weren't really afraid of other Serbian students, maybe there were physical conflicts but I don't remember them, at the end of the day, I was only a child. I don't believe that there were physical conflicts between people my age, but they must have happened between those who were older. But there was a state of fear. All of this was reflected in many other respects. It was reflected in how we suddenly had to divide into more shifts, organize our schooling into many more shifts, I mean, suddenly, life got very complicated. And, yes, this is the memory that I would consider the most important of my childhood.

Aurela Kadriu: Can you tell us a little about how it affected, a background of the family in which you grew up and then slowly tell us about how this division that took place in schools and other respects affected your family?

Doruntina Basha: In fact, the division that took place in schools was just a reflection of the already existing division in the society. The division existed in the society, but it got so strict in 1990 that it deepened the social divide.

At the time my parents were expelled from their workplaces, my father was working for the Television of Pristina and my mother was working for Radio Pristina. They were expelled from their workplaces on the same day. Of course, they weren't the only ones, they were expelled together with all the others. But, you know, it was a moment like a small break in your life when you stop and think, "What do I do now?"

This happened in every respect, in education, parents' work but also in our socialization as children. For example, Serbs and Albanians lived together in many neighborhoods of Pristina, especially in the

city center where I spent a part of my childhood when I went to my grandmother's and my maternal aunt's, there were Serbian children there and, of course, we played together until a certain moment. When the division took place, these friendships were divided as well, you know, without any word, without any agreement, it was simply implied that this friendship cannot exist, it cannot continue.

[The interview was cut with the request of the speaker]

Aurela Kadriu: How was life before your parents were expelled from their workplaces, before this division took place? And then, how was it after that, I mean how did that turning point affect your lives?

Doruntina Basha: Life was...for our family it was a normal life, my parents were employed, they had normal income for that time. We went to vacations, I mean, we had a normal life just like our peers in the city. And of course, when the division took place, everything changed. Suddenly there were existential issues and dilemmas and I mean we would no longer go to vacations, you know, I mean, there were small things we as children were used to, and they suddenly stopped happening.

[The interview was cut with the request of the speaker]

Aurela Kadriu: What did they tell you at school? You must've been curious about why it was divided. What did teachers say?

Doruntina Basha: This part is not very clear to me, I know that the discourse changed suddenly. Of course, I belong to the generation that managed to become a pioneer, and I managed to finish my first two years of the elementary school within Yugoslavia, and we had Serbian-Croatian language class at school and I mean, I got to taste a little of Yugoslavia from the perspective of a student, a pioneer.

After the wall was erected, of course, we were no longer part of the same story and the discourse changed. It is not very clear to me and I cannot tell you about how the change happened, was it gradual or immediate because so many things happened, so many changes, that we as children found ourselves in front of a situation where we had to accept the change and the new circumstances. After some time passed, that discourse became more serious and they became part of us, I mean, we started using that, "We are Albanians, we don't belong with them, we are oppressed," and so on, and so on. And, of course, we started to understand the situation differently and become part of that discourse.

Aurela Kadriu: Do you remember what your parents told you at home?

Doruntina Basha: In fact my parents were and continued being very careful and correct, I mean, they never wanted to polarize any situation in life. So, what changed in my family was the request and pressure from our parents to be more careful because that was also the time when the student poisoning² took place, and I can imagine how great the fear my parents had to live with was because

² In March 1990, after Kosovo schools were segregated along ethnic lines, thousands of Albanian students fell ill with symptoms of gas poisoning. No reliable investigation was conducted by the authorities, who always maintained no gas was used in Kosovo and the phenomenon must have been caused by mass hysteria. The

they had two children going to school at that time, and school continued, I mean, it didn't stop. It wasn't like, "We are in extraordinary circumstances and school has to stop," no, school continued, and it was part of the overall resistance that we as Albanians from Kosovo did.

I remember advice that I will never forget, one of my classmate's parent told us, "When you go to school, if you sense a scent of clove, leave the classroom immediately." This stayed with me for a very long time, and, when I grew up, I realized that they simply referred to the poisonings.

[The interview was cut with the request of the speaker]

Aurela Kadriu: Can you tell us how the transition from elementary to high school happened, and what do you remember from high school?

Doruntina Basha: I finished high school at the Xhevdet Doda gymnasium³ which was located where the Mother Teresa Cathedral is today. The reason why I chose the Xhevdet Doda gymnasium is because first at that time, Xhevdet Doda together with Sami Frashëri had a reputation as the best gymnasium, but on the other hand it was among the few schools that continued staying in their own building, because that was the time when most schools were going to private houses.⁴ It also was in the center, it was near my house and it was simply very feasible for me to go to school there.

Gymnasium is another period because the age is different, occupations and interests are different. Before going to gymnasium, I mean while still in elementary school, I joined Post-pessimists because there was a call to engage new people at that time. So, when I was in gymnasium, when I enrolled in the first year of gymnasium, I was already part of Post-pessimists, together with many of my friends with whom we had continued from elementary school to study in the same gymnasium.

So, I spent my gymnasium time with a lot of activities and it was a time when we perceived, I mean, my friends and I at that time, perceived our role not only as students, but as something more important in the society, I mean, as activists, to say, in a way. The gymnasium also has a division story, it has a wall in the middle of it, even though not a physical one. During that time, in 1999 when I was in the third year, the bombings took place and I had to stop gymnasium. And when we returned after the bombings at school, we finished two years, the third and fourth, at the same time, in order to be able to conclude the school year.

This was a very strange experience because school which until that time had been a symbol of resistance...we insisted to educate no matter the circumstances and what was happening, and now it

authorities also impeded independent investigations by foreign doctors, and to this day, with the exception of a publication in *The Lancet* that excludes poisoning, there are only contradictory conclusions on the nature and the cause of the phenomenon. For this see Julie Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a war*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1999.

³ A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

⁴ 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.

turned into something that had to be done during the night, as an obligation that had to be done in order to move to another stage, this happened.

Aurela Kadriu: Can we stay a little longer at high school time...

Doruntina Basha: It was around 1996 when a friend called me on the phone and simply asked me, “Would you like to become part of Post-pessimists?” And of course, at that time there weren’t many activities taking place in Kosovo that would be something “Wow!” for us teenagers.

Post-pessimists were the only ones who organized parties, exhibitions, they had the magazine, in fact the newspaper that was published together with *Koha Javore* [Weekly Times] for some time, and I had seen it, everybody had seen it and it was how to say...it was the only small window through which, you know, you could look abroad and be interested in what is happening on the other side. And so when my phone rang and my friend invited me, I was totally impressed and I immediately said, “Yes!” And we were a group of friends, people whom I knew before because we went to the same school, they became part of Post-pessimists.

We held the first meeting in the office of Post-pessimists which was in the street that today is named after Rexhep Luci, our office was there at the beginning. We gathered there, we were a group of 15-20 young people. We were the new generation of Post-pessimists, and we started with various activities right away. Many parties and exhibitions were organized. We published the newspaper, we also published the magazine named *Hapi Alternativ* [Alternative Step], but we eventually stopped publishing it and we all started to do something else. I worked in the newspaper and magazine. I wrote articles that were published. After some time I was the editor of the newspaper for a short time. The newspaper started to be published alone after some time, you could see it in the kiosks. We were very proud of what we were doing, of course.

There was a kind of tendency to normalize youth life in Kosovo at that time, besides that, it was even something more, because Post-pessimists were part of a regional network, and for many of us it was the first opportunity and the first time we could meet our peers outside Kosovo, and that was very important for that time, because we were living under circumstances where it was impossible, almost impossible, to meet someone who lives outside the borders of Kosovo.

So, Post-pessimists had great influence on how we, as the youth of that time, were formed, those of us who were part of them, I mean, and in general the youth that was part of the activities of Post-pessimists or was associated to Post-pessimists in one way or another.

In a way, it was a breaking of some internal borders we had, but also of borders that we had as a society. Through Post-pessimists, I got to travel to youth camps and meet people from the region, and as much as I learned about the region and the problems youth faced in these places, on the other hand it was very interesting for me to find out and learn that in fact there are prejudices. Because it was the first time that I found out that there are many prejudices outside Kosovo against Albanians from Kosovo, you know, for the first time I realized that when we go outside Kosovo, people look at us differently, because before they even get to know us, we have a reputation, a specific name. It was just as shocking.

But that only strengthened the need and eagerness to be part of Post-pessimists, of this movement as I would call it. There were activities of all kinds and they continued. It was a kind of nonstop cycle, new people would come, finish a kind of mission and leave, then others would come. So, I was engaged in Post-pessimists until sometime after the war, maybe '99, 2000 and then the entire structure and substance were changed, new people came and they continued for some years after that.

Aurela Kadriu: Can you tell us about that, you mentioned parties, exhibitions, in general any lasting memory of the organizing of these activities, group work, the talks you had while organizing something?

Doruntina Basha: The main memories I have of Post-pessimists are related to the office that I mentioned earlier. It was located where Strip Depo coffee shop is today on the Rexhep Luci street. It wasn't standard work in the sense that we would go there at a certain time, we went there whenever we wanted and there was always something happening inside, there were always people. It was interesting because the atmosphere was very relaxed and we adapted very quickly from the beginning.

There were always people there and you would always meet many new people whom you didn't see before, I mean, they were coming from various fields but you had to collaborate with them in one way or another because work connected us. There was no hierarchy, I don't remember such an organization there, because we all had our role. Simply put, I don't think there was a need for a hierarchical structure and we didn't need to report to someone on what we were doing because we were so invested to do something to revive the youth life in Pristina, that we all went there with a lot of energy and did whatever we could do best.

I remember and maybe this is something I think about mostly, the late hours of dealing with the newspaper layout and the editing of articles. It wasn't tiresome, I don't associate stress with that time, in any way, it was extremely entertaining doing all those things, simply I remember it as a kind of imitation of adults. Having access to a job that you think has to be done that way, but you are a child, you are young, you know, and of course, you approach it with the greatest passion and sincerity.

So, Post-pessimists...When I say Post-pessimists today, I remember that office, the hall, the big room with the big oval table, the small kitchen where we drank tea and the other room where there were the computers and we did the layout. I remember that for many activities, we often organized to stick posters, that was something, you know, when I say it now, it is nothing extraordinary but at that time, you know, when we organized to go out to stick posters, it was something almost illegal, you know, we felt like, "Wow! We are going out to stick posters around the city at 6 in the morning." We always found a reason to get together and spend time together.

Aurela Kadriu: Where did your activities, parties take place? Do you remember anything from them, what were their topics?

Doruntina Basha: There were activities that took place in the office as well, for example some exhibitions. There were activities that were held in shops at that time, for example at Santea coffee shop and other places. There were...in various venues, honestly. In Pristina at that time there

were...The number of venues where events took place was very limited, we used the same venues as everyone else. We organized parties, later when we changed the locations, we organized parties, we had a home [office] later.

Later we rented a house in the Tophane neighborhood, very near the UÇK street and it was a big house, it offered space to organize many of our activities and exhibitions. There were concerts, live music, artistic activities, exhibitions of installations, paintings, photographs and so on. Also *workshops* [English] and other activities, we organized all of them there, because we had the chance since we had a much better space.

At a certain moment, by the late '90s, within Post-pessimists, the group of Serbian members from Pristina was created with the idea of the normalization of relations between Albanian and Serbian youth, but this happened very shortly before the explosion of the war and so there were not many mutual activities held. So, when the war began, of course we abandoned the office, but then it was robbed and so on. And simply, the idea of having Serbs and Albanians within the Post-pessimists in Kosovo found no opportunity to develop further.

Aurela Kadriu: You mentioned that you travelled to youth camps, can you tell me how was the experience of traveling to the place where they were held for you?

Doruntina Basha: The first traveling I did with Post-pessimists was to Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and that was right after the war in Bosnia, that is, somewhere around '96, '97. It was my first travelling by plane, so I had many reasons to be happy about those travels, first that I was going to a camp where there were many of my peers from the region, but on the other hand, it was my first time of travelling by plane.

I know that we travelled to Belgrade by bus and in Belgrade we took the plane to Sarajevo, then we travelled to Mostar from Sarajevo. It was summer, it was very warm and we stayed at a children's camp there, it was a big space where there were various generations of Post-pessimists from all around the region. There were talks, meetings, we had other activities, *workshops* [English] the idea was for us to meet with each other and simply get to know each other.

A very interesting thing happened there, you know, I told you earlier that it was my first encounter with the idea of prejudices among people. They organized a kind of surprise there, a surprise performance that only some of the members organized. They were Albanians, Bosniaks and Serbs, they improvised a fight in the middle of a very serious meeting that was going on. They organized a fight with hate and offensive speech towards each other based on those stereotypes and ways according to which we perceived each other.

And I remember I was very shocked and took my folder in which they gave us all the materials, I wanted to leave because I said, "This is all a lie!" (laughs). But very quickly....We were all shocked because nobody realized, because the performance was very well played and there was a lot of hate, you know, that nobody wanted to stay in that room anymore.

But they returned very quickly and told us that it was only a performance through which they simply wanted to show how far the prejudice and hate between people can go. Of course, then we got the idea to do a similar public performance in the city, and we organized it, there were even televisions that recorded it, and it was simply a message from the youth of the region.

Aurela Kadriu: You did it in Mostar, right?

Doruntina Basha:...yes. And it was, it was, I don't know, I remember this, I especially remember the moment when I started looking at how people around us were reacting and I saw that they were all irritated and simply wanted to leave, that is a very clear memory that I have. It was a very important moment. Post-pessimists did that, I mean, at that time, they discussed prejudices and...between the Balkan nations.

Aurela Kadriu: How did you stop being part of Post-pessimists, was there anything definitive?

Doruntina Basha: No, in fact it happened very naturally, I stopped being part of Post-pessimists simply because I was interested in other things. It was the time when I almost finished high school and was looking towards the university, simply, I don't know, that chapter of my life came to an end.

[The interview was cut with the request of the speaker]

Aurela Kadriu: What did you do after, I mean how, the studies...how did your life continue after returning?

Doruntina Basha: I belong to a generation that suffered a lot of deep separations, I mean during our education but also all social and political events that took place in Kosovo, were deeply reflected in my generation in what we were identified with and what we dreamt and what we did in order to make our dreams come true. For example, the choice...The choices we made in life, were affected by these circumstances and often they were close to what we really wanted or were totally different from what we really wanted because the conditions in which we grew up were very difficult for us to realize ourselves and to be able to, I don't know, make true the dreams that we always had.

I don't know, a high number of people from my generation...I don't know whether they managed to become the people they wished to become when they grow up. I had chosen to study drama in the Faculty of Arts and at that time I was convinced that it was the greatest idea in the world. I took drama while in high school, I had some anthologies of avant-garde drama at home and I read them and I don't know, I was fascinated by the opportunities that drama offered to play with genres, words.

And then I enrolled in drama in Pristina, even though it was 2000 and the consequences of an education system that was established during the '90s were still present, there were many things not working, there was a lot of improvisation and simply there was lack of the structure which is what we, the students, missed mostly. I can say that from my viewpoint, our viewpoint, I mean, my generation's studying in the liberated Kosovo was more or less the same as studying in Kosovo before liberation because I don't know, maybe the education system itself was tired and traumatized by all the changes.

I graduated in 2004 and then in 2006 I decided to do something else and I enrolled in my Master's studies in Humanistics, a program of Erasmus Mundus, and I went to Scotland, Italy and France and so I finished my Master's.

Aurela Kadriu: And then when you returned, you returned right away, right?

Doruntina Basha: Yes, I returned to Pristina right after I finished my master's. I was convinced that now I was prepared and well equipped for life. It was a very difficult time to find a job, I found a job at last after two-three years and I don't know, things were changing and the changes were happening constantly and I have the impression that they were doing so with a much slower tempo than the one we needed, and in fact, it continues the same.

I don't know why I had the impression that if I did a master's abroad, my life in Kosovo would automatically improve and that was why I chose to return. But, it wasn't like that, and for many people, it continues not being like that, unfortunately.