

Rrahim K.

"We didn't know what a television was"



Rrahim K., m., born in Grejçevc in Kosovo in 1955, in Switzerland since 1977

How did you grow up in Kosovo?

I was born in the parish of Suareka in Kosovo. The village is called Grejkovc. I grew up as poor people do. Kosovo was the poorest of all the countries of former Yugoslavia: Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia. My parents were farmers, and my father worked as a road sweeper in Belgrade for 35 years. If my father hadn't sent that bit of money from Belgrade, our family couldn't have lived on what the farm made. There were five brothers and two sisters, and we all slept in the same room. There was another room just for receiving visitors. We brothers and sisters were very close.

Did your mother raise all the children on her own?

Yes. We children had to help around the farm. I had to walk about three kilometres to school early in the mornings. The school was down in the valley; we lived in the mountains. Sometimes we didn't have enough money to buy shoes. Many friends and relatives didn't have enough to buy clothes. Sometimes they didn't have anything to eat, not even a bit of bread. My father used to walk to Belgrade; the journey took him two weeks. He used to come back twice a year, walking again. Nonetheless, we were happy with our family and with our friends. We lived in freedom.

What do you mean by "free"?

Our mother was well contented with us, and we laughed a lot, we played, and we worked. Our mother was happy with her children, because we helped her a lot. Our mother organised things. She would send my brother to the forest to get wood, she'd send me to the kitchen, and she'd send the other brothers to work on the land. We really appreciated our mother.

My brother went to Holland in 1969 and worked there for a year and a half. He came back with a television. He said "this is a television." We didn't know what a television was. After that we'd go in every evening to watch the TV. My brother had made a little money, and he'd been able to buy himself a beautiful carpet. We children wore dirty shoes and dirty trousers. My brother said: "whoever comes into my house has to put on clean clothes and wash his feet". So that was what we did. Every evening we waited to see what we could see on the TV: the people and the pictures. We used to ask ourselves: "how is it possible that a person can come on TV?"

What was there to eat?

Maize bread, cheese, and lettuce. You can salt lettuce down, so we had it all through the winter. What we liked best was the griddle bread, which we used to cook over the fire in the mornings. We'd dunk the bread in the water the cheese was made in. That was great. We drank water out of the ground. We dug down twenty metres and struck water. We built a stone wall around it, and then we could get the water out of the well with a bucket on a rope.

Was there also tea and coffee?

Not coffee, because there was only Turkish coffee in those days, and children didn't get that. The only thing we got, if we went on a visit, or if a visitor came, was some sugar, which was put in our hands and which we licked. We didn't know of chocolate then. There wasn't any tea or coffee.

Which festivals were celebrated?

I'm a Moslem. At Ramadan, our biggest festival, our mother used to make some little cakes, which we had to divide up. Ramadan would begin the next day at eight o'clock in the morning, and at midday there were these little cakes, which you could eat at lunchtime. At Ramadan my mother would also slaughter a curban bajram. A curban bajram is a sheep. It's the custom at Ramadan. My mother had a bit more than our relatives. She would take enough meat for two days and then divide the rest among our relatives so that they also had something to celebrate Ramadan with.

Did you celebrate Ramadan with the family or with the people from the village?

At first with the family, and for the midday meal we'd go to relatives, or they'd come to us. We'd celebrate for three or four days and we didn't work during this time.

Was there a mosque in the village?

Yes, but it didn't belong to the local authority; it was private. The local authority was opposed to mosques and religion. Ramadan was actually forbidden under Communism, but they let us celebrate it anyway.

What memories do you have of school?

I wanted to learn a lot at school, for my future working life. From the first to the eighth class I had very good grades. After the eighth class I went on to the secondary school. Actually, we didn't have the money for this, so my mother sold her gold. She bought me clothes and books. That was the first time in my life I wore new clothes. It was important to my mother that I could acquire a good occupation. I had been going to that school for three years when my mother became very ill. She had to have six operations in the military hospital in Belgrade. I had to leave the school. My father, who was fifteen years older than my mother, came back. I helped the old man and hoped to be able to take a correspondence course in a year. But my mother was very ill, and I had no chance to go back to school. I was very sad about it then, and I still am today.

What did you want to be when you were fourteen?

I always wanted to become a teacher and work with children.

Did you train for another occupation?

I worked for a year and a half as a car mechanic. Then a letter came, and I had to do military service for fifteen months. I was in Bosnia, in a village near Sarajevo. Then I came back to Kosovo.

How was your time in the army?

I'm happy that I finished that military service. The officers were always trying to have me put in prison. But I was a very good soldier; I obeyed all the military regulations and made sure that I came home safe and sound to my family.

Albanians in the army were always being spied on. They said that the Kosovo Albanians had weapons. We were always being asked: "how many guns does your father have at home? Was your father against the Chetniks in the last world war?" We didn't know anything about it, my father never spoke of it. He always warned me against talking about politics while in the army.

What did you feel you were when you were twenty or twenty-five? A Yugoslav or a Kosovo Albanian?

I felt I was a Kosovo Albanian, as I do today, because we are Kosovo Albanians. We weren't Yugoslavs. Because Kosovo was a part of Albania, and they separated Kosovo from Albania. Even today, it's Kosovo Albanians that live there. The other ethnic groups - Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Macedonians, and Bosnians - make just seven percent in Kosovo.

In your village too?

In my village there have never been Serbs or Croats. Only Albanians.

Why did you come to Switzerland?

I had no chance of getting a job in Kosovo. Luckily, I had a brother who had come to Switzerland in 1976. He sent me money so that I could travel to Switzerland to look for a job.

How did you travel?

I took the train from Prizren to Belgrade. There was a direct train from Belgrade to Zurich. I arrived in the middle of the night. In those days you didn't need a visa for Switzerland. I had my brother's address, but I didn't know where it was. I took a taxi, showed the driver the address, and he took me to Kleindottingen, in Canton Aargau. That was in 1979, and the taxi cost 100 francs. I only had 50 francs, and my brother paid the other 50. That night I slept at my brother's.

The next day he took me to a market garden. I worked there for a week. There were other Albanians there. My brother got into a conflict with another Albanian, who also wanted to kill his brother. So that the conflict didn't escalate, I left. I found another job with my brother's former boss. The boss looked me up and down and asked if I was really a good worker. Then he said to my brother: "okay, he has to start in the morning". At the beginning I didn't understand German very well, didn't know how you called the hammer and the shovel, so there were misunderstandings. So I bought a book and learned German intensively. I came back to my room from work and studied. After two weeks the boss said: "it's impossible for you to learn German so fast". I told him I had given myself an intensive course.

In 1977 I worked illegally for eight months. After that I collected my money from the office and wanted to go back to Kosovo. The boss asked me if he should organise a residence permit for me. I said I didn't know if he'd have a job for me. He said: "I'll always have a job for you. I'm very happy with you. I need people like you that are willing to work."

I used to work in rubber boots to save the cost of buying shoes. I wanted to take my dirty boots off in the boss's office, which was carpeted, when I went there to sign the contract for the permit on 15 December. The boss forbade me to take my boots off. He was right, because if I had taken my boots off my feet, which were wet from running to and fro all day, would have stunk. He said "come in your dirty boots", and so I signed the contract.

On 15 February I got the permit from the immigration authorities and from the firm. I worked for nine months. Then I had to go back to Kosovo, stay there three months, and could come back with the permit. I stayed two or three weeks at home and invested the money I'd earned and then came back illegally through Austria to Switzerland. The Swiss border guards had arrested me a couple of times and invalidated my passport, so that I couldn't enter Switzerland any longer. So I crossed the border illegally at another place. I worked illegally for three months for my former boss. He took me on immediately, because he knew I'd come to work and earn money.

He issued me with a permit, which I sent to Belgrade together with the passport. The Swiss embassy in Belgrade issued me with a visa. I had to present myself at the border checkpoint and undergo a medical examination and x-ray. Because those that were sick had to go back, whether they had a permit or not. The healthy could stay for nine months. That was how I lived for four years. I always came in illegally, but luckily it always went well. I would have got the B permit after four years. However, my father died in 1981. You have to be in Switzerland for exactly nine months, not a day less, or you don't get the year-long B permit, and then you have to begin again with another four years as a seasonal worker. Due to my father's death I came twenty days too late. My application for the year-long permit was turned down. It was only four years later, in 1985, that I got the year-long permit, and then after another four years the permanent C permit.

Where did you live in the meantime?

At first in private houses: eight people to a room, sometimes twenty, because lots of relatives and friends came to Switzerland to look for work. They didn't have the money for a hotel, so we helped them out. Three or four would sleep in one bed in our bedroom, head to toe. The next day we'd go to work, and our friends would look for work. Everywhere, in private houses and if they saw a business.

How long did you live like that?

Four years. After four years I brought my wife and child to Switzerland. She was sick. I'd heard that the medical care in Switzerland was very good. The family doctor sent her to the University Hospital in Zurich. The doctors tried everything, but it was no use. We moved into my brother's flat so that my wife could cook for him and wash his clothes too. The next three

children were born here in Switzerland. The youngest came in 1990 and is named after our country, Kosovar.

Did you continue to support the family in Kosovo financially?

From 1981 I was wanted in ex-Yugoslavia. I was accused of political activities in Switzerland on behalf of a Kosovo Republic. I wasn't involved in any such thing. After one or two weeks in Kosovo I had to leave again, or I'd have ended up in jail. Yugoslavia was divided up in 1981. We wanted Kosovo to become a republic. All the republics wanted to create a confederation in ex-Yugoslavia. It didn't happen, unfortunately, because Milosevic, the Serbian leader, was opposed; he wanted a Greater Serbia.

After 1988 I went every week or every fortnight to Kosovo. I'd find an old car somewhere and sort out a temporary number plate. On Friday evening I'd load the car up with clothes and groceries and drive to Kosovo. I brought things for lots of families, because the Serbs had taken away their work and sent the teachers away from the schools. I'd leave the cars there and come home on the bus. I'd drive for 23 hours without stopping or sleeping. If I couldn't go for two weeks, I'd be very agitated. There is a mountain from which you can see my village. It's about 15km from this mountain to my village. On the mountain I'd begin to cry until I could hardly drive the car.

After three years you didn't go back any more?

No, because there was a war in Yugoslavia. You couldn't drive through Slovenia and Croatia and then through Belgrade to Kosovo. I had to drive through Austria and Hungary and then through Subodica in Vojvodina - a province of ex-Yugoslavia called Vojvodina - and then through Belgrade to Kosovo. This route took 23 or 24 hours, but without a break. Just fill up, eat in the car, and drive.

Lots of people who came to Switzerland to look for work didn't find any and had to go back. They didn't have any money for the journey, so I'd take them in the car for free.

How have your relationships with the Swiss developed? Do you socialise mostly with Albanian-speaking people, or do you also have friends from Switzerland?

I have a lot of Albanian friends, but also a lot of Swiss, and also Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. When my son was sick, my boss's wife used to drive my wife to the hospital every day. She helped us a lot.

Yes, I've got lots of Swiss friends. I've changed my employer twenty-three times in Switzerland. No firm has ever fired me. I've always given notice because I wanted to help a relative or a fellow-countryman. Or I left one of these jobs of mine with my work permit.

I've worked as a bricklayer. I can do anything that there is to do on a building site. I'm a crane driver. I've even dismantled and erected cranes. There was no need for crane erectors.

How did you find Swiss people when you first came here in 1977?

In 1977 they respected us a lot. For instance, in the shops: because we worked the whole day, we could only go to buy bread in the evening, when all the bread was already gone. The manager at Migros in Klingnau always used to reserve bread for us. And also at work they showed us respect. They'd bring us a snack and coffee in the morning break.

It's a bit different today. Unfortunately a lot of people came as refugees. There are people who give Kosovo Albanians a bad name. Serbs pay people and send them to Switzerland, to Germany and Austria, to give Kosovo Albanians a bad reputation. Then there are criminals and drug dealers who damage the good name of those of us who came to work.

I'm also a caretaker. I can feel that people who don't know me keep their distance, because they've heard a lot of bad things in the media about us Kosovo Albanians. But the Swiss who know me are still fine and friendly with me. But when people don't know us, then it's not good.

What were the good moments in your life as a migrant, and what was difficult?

What was positive was what I earned here in Switzerland. I could build up something in Kosovo. I've made a good life for me and my children. I'd like to go back to my own country, because I love it. I'm like an asylum seeker here in Switzerland. But if I go back to Kosovo now, these 22 years that I've worked will be lost. Unfortunately I don't have a roof over my head there now. But it's important for me that my family goes back to Kosovo.

Will your children go with you?

Yes. A year ago they were saying before the summer holidays: "Dad, when are we going back to Kosovo? When are we going to our grandmother's? When can we play there?" They want to see the dogs there, the hens and the cows and all. Things there aren't the way they are here. Here the children live in a flat, they have to come home from playing at a certain time, they aren't allowed to make any noise. There they have more freedom, are with the relatives the whole day, eating with friends. It doesn't matter when they come home. In 1988, when we couldn't go to Kosovo any more because of the war, my children were nearly ill from homesickness.

Nigg, Heinz (Hrsg.) (1999) Da und fort. Leben in zwei Welten. Interviews, Berichte und Dokumente zur Immigration und Binnenwanderung in der Schweiz. Zürich: Limmat Verlag

Nigg, Heinz (1999) Here and away. Living in two worlds. Zurich: www.migrant.ch
Translation: Simon Milligan



Except where otherwise noted, this site is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/>