

Newshour interview with Kelmendi

FLEEING KOSOVO

April 12, 1999

Deported from Kosovo earlier this month – Vjosa Dobruna, a physician who ran the Center for Protection of Women and Children in Pristina, and Aferdita Kelmendi, director of Radio-TV 21 in Pristina, discuss the war and their departure from their troubled homeland.

JIM LEHRER: Again, the refugees: We begin with a report from the Macedonia border by Tim Ewart of Independent Television News.

TIM EWART: At a place called Blazhde in Macedonia, the rows of tents seem to go on forever. This one camp is now home to 30,000 refugees, just part of the 125,000 believed to be in the country. The latest pitiful group appeared on the border with Kosovo today, trying to walk along a railway line. Macedonian policemen sent them back to a checkpoint. A Serb police officer watched as they filled in the necessary forms. There was at least one joyous reunion at this depressing place, and soon afterwards, the first family was allowed across. They're joining relatives in Macedonia and leaving behind the terrors of Kosovo.

MAN: If we come, you have to leave. If we come again, we're going to kill you.

TIM EWART: Did you see them killing anybody?

MAN: I haven't seen, but we have heard that a lot of people are dead. I don't know.

TIM EWART: And are there a lot of people hiding? We've heard reports that many, many thousands of people are hiding.

MAN: Ten of thousands are hiding in the mountains, house to house, you know, running through the night.

TIM EWART: Not all the refugee families are together. On a wall at Blazhde, there are scores of messages from people desperate to trace loved ones now missing. The camp will be home for today's new arrivals until someone decides they must move on again.

JIM LEHRER: Now, two refugees who fled Kosovo two weeks ago and arrived in Washington on Sunday. Phil Ponce talked to them earlier this evening.

PHIL PONCE: With us are Vjosa Dobruna, a physician who ran the Center for Protection of Women and Children in Pristina, and Aferdita Kelmendi, a journalist who was the director of Radio TV 21 in Pristina. They were brought here by the International Crisis Group, a human rights group. Both will be meeting with administration officials this week and are scheduled to testify on Capitol Hill. Ladies, welcome. Dr. Dobruna, when did you know you had to leave Kosovo?

DR. VJOSA DOBRUNA: There were preparations practically being done that -- to leave Kosovo. So many people went in hiding after the police came to our houses and trying to -- trying to arrest practically -- leaders, community leaders, human rights activists, journalists, and people like that, so -

PHIL PONCE: Is that what happened? Is that what happened to you? Did the police come to your door because of your involvement in this human rights group?

DR. VJOSA DOBRUNA: Yes, yes, yes.

PHIL PONCE: And describe what happened.

DR. VJOSA DOBRUNA: Now, around 1 o'clock at night after the

first air strikes happened, they arrested and executed a member of the Council for Defense of Human Rights and Freedom, and with two sons. And then they came house to house to search for activists. So around 3 o'clock the same night, I had to leave my home and to be in hiding, to spend in hiding the next seven days.

PHIL PONCE: And then what happened after those days?

DR. VJOSA DOBRUNA: After seven days, I came back home. I asked some of my cousins to drive me back home to change my clothes and to get something from my apartment, and then police was in front of the door. And there were just -- they had besieged Radio 21, Aferdita's, the very next block of the building. And then they start -- you know, they didn't ask us anything. They just started beating us, and they took the driver from my car.

PHIL PONCE: You personally were beaten?

DR. VJOSA DOBRUNA: Yes. I was beaten on my head, and since I had a baby -I had my sister's son in my hand - so they were not very violent to me. I mean, they were just hitting my head, and same they did to my sister. But they took the driver, my brother-in-law, and they really beat him very severely. And then they were asking for money and jewelry and whatever we had in our pockets. So they took that all, and then they directed us out of the town.

PHIL PONCE: They directed you? What, did you get in a car?

DR. VJOSA DOBRUNA: They allowed us to get in the car, and then they said -- we wanted to go downtown. We couldn't go because there were military and paramilitary in every intersection between two streets. So they were with us. So it was the line of militaries and paramilitaries until the exit of the town when we saw the city of Pristina. When we joined another convoy of cars that were leaving, they were same as we were, forced to leave city of Pristina.

PHIL PONCE: And how long did it take you to get from Pristina to the border, and what happened?

DR. VJOSA DOBRUNA: The border, it takes just usually it takes some 40 minutes, but to the border in the highway Pristina, Skopje to the capital of Macedonia, but that day it took us longer because there were people -- we were seeing people in the road there that were taken out of the convoys, and their cars were taken, and they were plundered, and mistreated, and they were -

PHIL PONCE: And you saw all of this?

DR. VJOSA DOBRUNA: I saw all of that. We saw women that were being stripped in front of us, stripped of their clothes to search for money and jewelry. We saw people being beaten, and then finally we reached the border after an hour and a half, something like that.

PHIL PONCE: And at this point, you're with your sister, your nephew, and a brother-in-law.

DR. VJOSA DOBRUNA: And my brother-in-law. Meanwhile, we just took several people in our car. So at one moment when we reached the border, we were seven adults and two babies in the car.

PHIL PONCE: And you had to stay in your car?

DR. VJOSA DOBRUNA: Yes, we had to stay in the car next 20 hours, I mean, without going out the door. And then after 20 hours, next day around 6, 7 o'clock in the morning -- I just don't remember very well -- I mean, we were allowed to get out of the car to get some water or something, because majority of the people, they didn't have food or anything or water with us in the cars. I mean, it happened all suddenly. I mean, nobody was prepared to leave the city.

PHIL PONCE: When you left the city, what did you have with you?

DR. VJOSA DOBRUNA: I had my jeans and my T-shirt and a jacket and my handbag.

PHIL PONCE: Did they take your personal documents? There are

reports that -

DR. VJOSA DOBRUNA: No, they didn't take my personal documents, because when I saw that they are taking personal documents from the cars and the people that were checked, I managed to put my documents in the diaper of my nephew, and I did same with my mobile phone, so -

PHIL PONCE: And what was it like at the border? How long did it take you to get through?

DR. VJOSA DOBRUNA: The border was terrible. I mean, at the border, first night it was really terrible. It was dark, and it was restriction, because of the air strikes. And then we were all sitting in the car in silence, and there were some children crying. You could hear children crying. And the woman was delivering the baby just five cars after ours, and we couldn't get out to help her.

PHIL PONCE: She was actually giving birth?

DR. VJOSA DOBRUNA: She was giving birth -- and in the car, and they couldn't go out. And then masked policemen keep on coming to our door, knocking on the glass of the car and then saying, "You know, you have 15 seconds to give \$1,000 or \$500," depends on the brand of the car we were in.

PHIL PONCE: So did you have to give more money at that point?

DR. VJOSA DOBRUNA: Yes, we had to give more money at that point. And then so - and over and over during the whole night they were going from car to car, beating men and harassing women, humiliating them and then taking whatever we had in our car. And if we had a good jacket, I mean, they will take it. But mostly they were taking money and jewelry and, you know, and beating people.

PHIL PONCE: Mrs. Kelmendi, tell me your story. When did you know you had to leave Pristina?

AFERDITA KELMENDI: I left my flat there together with my

family one night before bombing - air strike.

PHIL PONCE: Your husband and your two children?

AFERDITA KELMENDI: Yes, my husband, two children, and my mother-in-law. And after that, we go in safer place, because the place where we live, I saw that night very strange people, which don't belong to our neighborhood. And so I was hiding in one other flat, and one neighbor from other neighborhood came and say to me that I have to leave from there because I -- "You are very well-known person, and so we can have trouble."

PHIL PONCE: You're well known because you're a journalist with your station?

AFERDITA KELMENDI: Yes, yes. And then I left also that flat, and we went in another flat with hiding ourselves with our friends.

PHIL PONCE: How many nights did you hide? Sorry to interrupt.

AFERDITA KELMENDI: Five nights. And in one flat, we was twenty-one persons, three families together with our children. And for five nights, we -- for five days and nights, we didn't have so much food, so we eat once a day. And we had a lot of water and cigarettes.

PHIL PONCE: Finally you went back to your house, and what happened then?

AFERDITA KELMENDI: No, I didn't go back to my house, but in one moment, I get out, and I went in the direction of my radio. And I -- when I was very near of my radio, I saw that police broke the door, and they enter in about 20 of them. And then I knew it that I have to change again place because -

PHIL PONCE: Police broke into the apartment where you were staying?

AFERDITA KELMENDI: No, no, the radio station.

PHIL PONCE: Oh, the radio station. I see.

AFERDITA KELMENDI: The radio/TV station where I used to work together with my colleagues. And then I knew it that I have to leave together with my family and with my colleagues, because there was all documentation and names and addresses and everything.

PHIL PONCE: How did you leave?

AFERDITA KELMENDI: I wanted to change a place, again, to go in some other place in Pristina to some other our friends. And in a moment when we get in our car, which was -- which I left 200 meters away from the radio, when I get there, when I enter in the car, my family was waiting for me there. And also my friends came there. Then came a car, a big Mercedes, a green one. Two armed people was there, and they says, "You have to follow us." And we asked them, "Where are you sending us?" And they said, "Don't ask so much, because we will burn your car together with you." And so then they said to us that we have to pay 200 Deutsch marks for each person in this car.

PHIL PONCE: So you got into a Mercedes with them or you followed them?

AFERDITA KELMENDI: No, no, we followed them.

PHIL PONCE: Followed them. And where did the car lead you, and what did you see?

AFERDITA KELMENDI: Yes. They lead us in an exit of the town, and we had to go after them. And at one checkpoint, they stopped and they talked to about 15 policemen. It seems that they said to them that we have paid. And then after that, after 50 meters, there was another checkpoint in the exit of the town. So then they let us exit the town. We was stopped also twice after that, and we had to pay again to this -- it seems they was paramilitary forces, because they have not uniforms. They was civilians with black caps and very heavy armed.

PHIL PONCE: And you finally got to the border. What happened at the border?

AFERDITA KELMENDI: Finally when we got about three kilometers from the border, we -- we slept there for three nights. We didn't have food. We had only water, which we have collected from the near places. And for three nights we didn't eat nothing. And as we also explained, we have pass through all that knocking on the windows and asking for money and taking the cars and et cetera.

PHIL PONCE: Dr. Dobruna, what memory will stay with you from your experience?

DR. VJOSA DOBRUNA: Oh, humiliation and the fear of those seven nights in hiding, you know. We were just -- we were just listening who is the next one to be found and to be executed and the fear that they are going to recognize you in that queue when we were in the car, and then mistreatment of the rest of us after we were deported to the Macedonian side, when the Macedonian police start hitting deportees that were coming in train. I will never forget those trains where people were loaded like cattle, and they were just being thrown off the train -- old people, young people, women with children, pregnant women. And a lot of people from my town that I knew, many of my patients, young children, they were just being thrown at the railroad, and then they were just being made to sit down in that valley in Blace. And it started raining, very cold rain. And then there was no food. There was no hope -- because everybody thought, "Okay, they deported us, and there is a hope we are going to get back, so we are at least somebody's going to welcome us as a human being."

PHIL PONCE: Mrs. Kelmendi, speaking of going back to Kosovo, do you want to go back to Kosovo?

AFERDITA KELMENDI: Definitely.

PHIL PONCE: Why?

AFERDITA KELMENDI: Why? That is my place, that is a place

where I develop radio station. I have friends. That is my home. So I don't think that there is any other place where I can live.

PHIL PONCE: In spite of everything that happened to you?

AFERDITA KELMENDI: Yes, definitely.

PHIL PONCE: Ladies, I thank you both very much.

AFERDITA KELMENDI: Thank you.

DR. VJOSA DOBRUNA: You're welcome.