

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH BEKA KOJADINOVIC

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

MAY 5, 2022

TRANSCRIPT BY

ZOOM

Paul Clemens: Okay, the transcript is on, and it is recording. So, your semester is over, or are you still taking exams?

Beka Kojadinovic: No, I'm done. I'm officially done with classes, yes, and I'll be leaving in five days.

PC: Wow. So, you're not staying around for the graduation ceremony?

BK: No, no, unfortunately not.

PC: You're going directly back to Serbia now?

BK: Yes, yes.

PC: To see your family.

BK: Yes.

PC: Are your plans any more settled now than when I last talked to you? Do you have some sense of where you're headed over at least the next year?

BK: Well, let's say short term, I kind of figured things out. I got a job back in Serbia, so we'll see. It's for the next six months, and then after that, I don't know. Wherever life takes me, I'm ready for anything at this point, so we'll see. Maybe I'll even come back here at some point. Who knows?

PC: Are you going to have a group of friends from the people you played volleyball with at Rutgers, are those people you're going to stay in touch with, you think?

BK: Yes, I was very fortunate to have met three girls that I'm pretty sure I'm going to stay friends for the rest of my life, and one of them lives in my hometown, in Belgrade in Serbia.

PC: Ah ha.

BK: Yeah, and two of them are from Russia, so I'm pretty sure we're going to stay in touch. There are a lot of people from here that I'm sure we'll stay in touch. So, we'll see.

PC: Will there be any players of Serbian birth or ancestry on the team next year?

BK: Yes, there's one more girl. She's a sophomore now. She's going to be a junior.

PC: Yeah, that's what I thought. I wasn't sure.

BK: Yes, yes.

PC: When was the last time you saw your parents?

BK: Well, actually, I went back home like three weeks ago, actually a month ago, for spring break. Yeah, I was able to go for a week or so. So, it wasn't that long ago.

PC: Okay, good. Tell me a little bit how this last year has gone, both in terms of the general sort of health and differences in playing when we were still in a COVID world and also in terms of just your reaction to the season you had.

BK: Yeah. Well, first of all, I want to apologize right away, because my memory is terrible. So, if I forget certain things, it's just because my memory is bad in general, you know. But, from what I can remember, last season was much better than the one before, when we talked, in terms of COVID and restrictions and everything that was happening, because, first of all, you saw we were able to have fans after like six months. Also, the testing protocol, that was canceled completely, so we didn't have to test unless someone had symptoms. We were able to travel a lot more often. So, in general, it was a lot better. Now, since I'm not with the team anymore, I can see that the university eased up with the restrictions in general. You don't have to wear masks in public places anymore, only on like buses and auditoriums. So, I feel like the situation is getting a lot better, not just here, but in the world in general. It's the same in Europe.

PC: Is it the same in Serbia? Is that your sense?

BK: Yes, yes. I read that we don't even have to have a negative test anymore to enter the country. So, I guess things are getting better.

PC: Do you know if there's been a lot of political protests about masks and vaccines in Serbia the way there has been in the United States?

BK: Of course, yes, but mostly last year, yes, in the midst of the pandemic, yes, of course, because a lot of people don't believe in vaccines or didn't want to wear masks anymore. They didn't think it was helping anyone. Of course, there's always going to be things like that. But it mostly happened during the previous year.

PC: The year, in terms of the pandemic, was actually a year in which it didn't greatly affect what you were able to do, both as a student and as an athlete at Rutgers. It went by pretty easily.

BK: Yes, I would say so, yeah. The only thing annoying is that I have three-hour classes as a graduate student. So, sitting in a classroom for three hours or six hours a day with a mask on, it's still kind of hard to do. But, then again, you get used to it, of course; there's nothing you can do about it.

PC: Hopefully, your professor gives you a break during that three hours.

BK: Yes, yes, of course, they're very lenient, and they're very understanding. So, we took breaks, and it was completely fine.

PC: You were a graduate student this year, partly because you'd gotten that extra year of eligibility based on everything that happened.

BK: Yes.

PC: What were you studying?

BK: Financial analysis.

PC: That's still something you might end up doing when you ...

BK: Absolutely, yes. I got a job as a data analyst at a British company. So, that's definitely something I would like to pursue, at least in the short term, to see if that's something I'm actually interested in. But I can tell you that my master's has brought me so much. I think I've learned so much during this year that it kind of introduced me to this field, finance field, and I now I'm so much more interested in it. So, it's definitely something I'm going to pursue in the future.

PC: Okay. I know your team didn't do exceptionally well, to put it mildly, in the Big Ten this year.

BK: Yes.

PC: Did that surprise you? Did you think you were going to do better?

BK: Honestly, yes, it did surprise me, especially after the year that we had, the spring season. You saw that we were getting so much better. We ended up ninth in the Big Ten, which is a big deal coming as a team that didn't have a single win or three wins in five years, you know, so it was a great season for us. Then, the fall didn't go as planned. But our coach used to say all the time that success isn't linear, so you can't expect to go up just like every single year. It is going to be six wins, then eight, and then you're going to end up being the number one team in the conference, it doesn't work like that. So, I kind of understood that. Of course, I was disappointed because it was my last season and I was expecting so much more, but at the end of the day, it's not something that I look at negatively. I feel like it's all part of the process, and I believe that the girls will do better in the years ahead. So, we'll see.

PC: You may not know the answer to this, but just a curiosity question, did you have more minutes on the court than any other player?

BK: Well, I don't know this, but I'm pretty sure I was one of the people who had the most minutes. Yes, as a senior, as the captain, so yeah. Inna [Balyko] probably, our setter, was also on the court a lot. But, maybe, yeah, probably.

PC: I watched whatever, seven, probably eight matches, or something like that, and you were out there a lot. Madyson was out there a lot, and there was another woman who was out there a lot who is probably the person you're referring to, but nobody I recognize or remember directly.

BK: Yeah, probably.

PC: You mentioned in your last interview you had to sort of think a lot about what it would mean to spend the rest of your life without playing volleyball and you weren't sure that was going to happen, but that was sort of a terrible thing to think about. Do you think you're going to have a chance to go on playing volleyball?

BK: Yes, I actually do. That's a part of the reason why I'm moving back to Serbia, because I believe I'll be able to play professionally and also work either part time and then play, or once I get a full-time job, maybe I'll focus more on that. But there's definitely an opportunity for me to keep playing if I want to, and at this point, I do kind of want to get back on the court. I miss it.

PC: Yeah, okay, good. There are actually only a couple little things I wanted to ask you in addition. One, there's been a change in the policy at Rutgers, as it applies to historians and people like historians who do this sort of oral history, which has loosened up a lot of regulations, which were initially made for people who are in the sciences and are doing things that are much more quantitative and sampling and where the anonymity of the individuals remains a much more important part. That's a long-winded way of saying, we've been released from a lot of the rules that we initially got our clearance for doing, the consent process that we've been using.

One of the things that's opened up is the possibility that interviews like the one I've done with you could be turned over to the Rutgers Oral History Archives, which is the central oral history organization at Rutgers and nationwide as well, a very well-known one. If you did that with your interview, you'd have to go through sort of an agreement process with them, where they'd explain to you what that means. It does not mean posting, as far as I know, a video or anything like that, but they do put the transcripts up with you having the right to limit--you can say, "When I'm dead," you can say twenty years from now, you can say to them tomorrow. People respond in different ways. I'd like to have them at least get in touch with you and see if you're interested, and if you're not, that's fine. But when we went into this, we weren't going to save these after our project was over. Now, since we're no longer under the IRB rulings, we're not going to save them, but because they deal with the pandemic and in your case with athletics, which is part of Rutgers' history, they'd probably be a very valuable resource. With your permission, I will get them in touch with you, and then you can decide for yourself whether you want to turn it over, and if you do, under what terms, which brings up two questions. One, what's going to be the best email to reach you at once you go to Serbia?

BK: Can I spell this for you?

PC: You sure can. [laughter]

BK: [laughter] Because this is going to be difficult. [Editor's Note: Beka spells out her email address, which has been taken out of the transcript to protect her privacy.]

PC: Okay, got it. Can you send me an email from that Gmail, and give me, assuming, again, completely voluntarily, if you wish to do this, an address that you can be reached at if I want to mail something to you?

BK: Of course.

PC: That gives us a second contact, and something that, if it's through your parents, that's probably actually the best thing because it's a way that I or people at the [Rutgers Oral History Archives] would have a way of getting ahold of you.

BK: Absolutely.

PC: Okay, that would be very useful. That's about it. I mean, you've followed up, and we know sort of how this story has come out to this point in your life. You've got a lot of time ahead of you. Oh, one other small question, because it really intrigued me. When I saw you briefly at the end of that last game, you had some Serbian volleyball, I think, friends there from another university, Penn State or something like that, I don't remember where. They had come to see you play.

BK: Yes, they're not volleyball players.

PC: Oh, but they're athletes.

BK: They're athletes, yeah. They're rowers.

PC: The question out of that is: there is a network that you're part of of Serbians who are in the United States who are playing in athletic events? These are people you know because you're connected by your athletic experiences in the United States, or do they just happen to be people you knew before you even came over here?

BK: No, I can actually say that Rutgers volleyball kind of connected us in a way, because a girl came to a volleyball camp and we were their coaches, and I figured that this girl is Serbian and one of those guys is her brother. So, we went to their house for Thanksgiving, and I met the other guys. So, we kind of stayed in touch, and they were happy to come and support us for our last game. So, it's great.

PC: Yeah. That would have been really exciting for me if I were in your shoes ...

BK: Of course.

PC: ... That people should drive across or get across some distance to travel and come watch you. That was really neat. I just wondered how formalized it was, whether the team had gone out of its way to connect you with other athletes from the same country. Well, that's about it.

It's been really nice getting to meet you. I'll follow up with the oral history society and ask them to get in touch with you, and they can tell you how they work. I'll tell them to wait a couple of weeks until you're back in Serbia.

BK: That's completely fine. You can reach me any time in my email. I also wanted to ask you something quickly, if that's okay.

PC: Sure.

BK: About this research, can you tell me something more about it? I am very interested. You mentioned that it's going to take a couple of years for you to collect the data and to actually publish it, but what is it going to entail? What is actually ...

PC: Well, we're working on a book, and my collaborator, Johanna Schoen, who's of German-Austrian background and a women's historian, a historian of medical ethics, and it may or may not get done. One of the hard things about this is as intensely interested as people are in the pandemic while it's going on, there's going to be a period in which what people want to do is forget it. [laughter] So, the way we work, we work slowly, and whether by the time we get done, there is still enough interest to justify publishing a book, it's an open question. What we know is having the interviews, there's something that somebody like the oral history society can use, and then maybe people will come back to those interviews at some point in the future when they want to talk about how America had dealt with or how the world dealt with the pandemic, which unfortunately is a question that may continue to be of some importance, because there may be subsequent ones. But the book, if it comes about, we'll use these interviews in thematic chapters. There won't be a chapter about the volleyball team.

BK: Yes, of course.

PC: What would happen would be a chapter that dealt with the way in which various programs at Rutgers, which had certain conditions that were particularly badly affected by the pandemic, the most obvious of those are where significant face-to-face contact and, in some cases, bodily contact, have to take place, and how those programs dealt with it. So, your program and virtually all athletic programs, but also the dance program, for example, and maybe physical therapy have that in common. There's a certain ...

BK: Yeah.

PC: You can't teach dance--well, you have to teach dance, but it's incredibly difficult where people can't touch each other, because that's part of what they're doing. You can't really teach people how to play soccer or volleyball without the physical contact that goes into the ...

BK: Yes, absolutely.

PC: So, that could be one of the chapters which deals with how programs which had that physical contact component to it kept on, if you will, teaching or performing or whatever they were doing. The difficulty for us in terms of professionally doing this is also not only that

there's a worry that people may lose interest, but there will be a Rutgers book about the pandemic and it won't be ours. It will be more a memorial to what has happened. It will be filled with a lot of very appropriate but shorter than our interviews, sort of sound-bite type things, from various people around the university. It will have a lot of glossy pictures in it, because the university is capable of producing those and getting the permissions. So, there'll be something of that sort that will come out first, and that could actually end up precluding us publishing this and just being more interested in creating a public record through the Oral History Archives that other people could use. That said, we've still got two years of work ahead of us. There are all sorts of people we have to interview. So, I don't know what happens if during the semester, I'm just hanging on by a thread and trying to get as many individual interviews done as possible. During the summer, I can actually stop and sit down and think about what we've done and talk to my collaborator, Johanna, and try to figure out where we go from here. We'll be meeting a couple of times during May and talking about things. But we've got a couple of years of work to do on this, and that, we'll get done. So, that's what we're doing.

BK: Yeah. Okay, it sounds amazing. I really wish that you guys publish this book because I would love to read it, and it would be incredible, honestly, to remember this period of time that we might want to forget, yes, but it also marked a big part of our lives, especially for us who were here during the pandemic and student-athletes. So, I wish you the best of luck, honestly.

PC: I'll add in one thing more for you. I actually didn't get to go to it, but the two of us wrote up a paper, not so much an analysis of things, but really a paper that sort of divided the project up into three sections: one about programs that had difficulty with teaching; and one that dealt with some of the frontline workers, and, there, we were talking mostly about nursing students and other parts of that; and the third about some of the inequalities that have occurred with all of this and dealt with a unit at Rutgers that primarily does teaching inside of prisons. They had a miserable time during the pandemic for all sorts of reasons. We presented a paper about that, which was mostly just raw material, it was people's interviews back and forth, and used dance and this New Jersey-Step Program, which is the one in the prisons, and nursing to talk about that. But there were a couple of quotes in there, there were lots of quotes, but there were a couple of quotes from outside that smaller circle of material, one of which was from you.

BK: [laughter] Oh, really?

PC: It opened with some stories about how people had first experienced the pandemic, and one of the stories we used in the very beginning was you. [laughter]

BK: [laughter] Oh, unbelievable. That's great. Thank you so much.

PC: Well, thank you.

BK: I'm glad I was able to help.

PC: You were. Okay, well, you take care of yourself.

BK: Thank you so much for everything. We'll keep in touch.



PC: You send me an email from your Gmail account with your address in it.

BK: I will. Thank you so much. Take care, okay.

PC: Bye, bye.

BK: Thank you, bye.

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Transcribed by Zoom

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