

## INTERVIEW WITH BESIM MALOTA

New York | Date: August 29, 2016

Duration: 84 minutes

Present:

1. Besim Malota (Speaker)
2. Anna Di Lellio (Interviewer)

*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

**Anna Di Lellio:** *Can you please tell me, we are going to see this, can you please tell me first something about yourself, your name, where you were born, if you don't mind, your age. And how you came here, so a little bit of your background?* [English]

**Besim Malota:** *My name is Besim Malota. I was born in Grabanica, municipality of Klina in Kosovo. I came in United States in 1986. I left...* [English]

**Anna Di Lellio:** *Do you want to do it in English or Albanian?* [English]

**Besim Malota:** *Albanian is much better for me* [English].

**Anna Di Lellio:** *Yes, I can understand, maybe I will ask you questions in English but yes, just start in Albanian* [English].

**Besim Malota:** My name is Besim Malota, I was born in Grabanica, in the municipality of Klina. I came to the United States of America in 1986. I left Kosovo in 1983. I was in Germany for some time and in Sweden, later I emigrated to the United States of America. The reason I left Kosovo was the question, the political question, because I was persecuted politically, arrested in Peja for some time after the demonstrations of the year 1982, which were organized in Klina by a group of students of the high school Luigj Gurakuqi, with whom I collaborated. The ruling power of that time put pressure on all of us and many left their birthplace not to be part of that system which was not pro-Albanians.

*You have any questions?* [English]. In 1986 I came to the United States of America. Here I found Albanians organized in the national club, Jusuf Gërvalla, and I joined them immediately and after six months the association Shpresa [Hope] was founded in Brooklyn by a group of youth from Kosovo, really from other Albanian lands in former Yugoslavia. After the foundation of the association Shpresa I was the secretary of the association for some years and this is how the activities of the association Shpresa began in 1990.

The association Shpresa undertook an activity for the reconciliation of blood in the United States of America, inviting a delegation from Kosovo, at whose head there was professor Anton Çetta,<sup>1</sup> the member of the Academy Mark Krasniqi,<sup>2</sup> Bajram Kelmendi<sup>3</sup> and many others. Here, in the United States of America, Albanians brought their own traditions from there and also brought vengeance. We had some cases, I remember how many, over forty cases of Albanian families in blood feuds in the United States of America. And many from these families were forced to leave the place where the situation had occurred or were always in a so called *besa*<sup>4</sup> according to the *Kanun*<sup>5</sup> which was practiced also in our place, this practice, and continued here too.

Seeing the circumstances in which the Albanian people lived in Kosovo and the ways in which Albanians were reconciling blood feuds in Kosovo, the association Shpresa decided to undertake this action also here. The association Shpresa at the time chose me as the leader of this action and a group of other friends such as Tahir Nikçi, Xhevat Kuken, Sami Syleimani, Riza Rugova, Xhavit Kabashi to organize the reconciliation of blood feuds in the United States of America. Within a very short time we identified more than forty Albanian families, which were in blood among themselves in the United States of America. I am saying in the region of New York, the majority was in the region of New York.

With the arrival of what we called then the *Krushqit e Pajtimit*,<sup>6</sup> we immediately began to work towards reconciliation, and the first action was taken in the Gjonbalaj family. The Gjonbalaj family and a family from Shkodra were in enmity, I seem to have forgotten the last name, but they were from Shkodra and were in blood. The Gjonbalaj family lived in New York, while the other family had moved six hours from New York and they never came to New York because there was no *besa* from the Gjonbalaj. At the time, the campaign began with the Gjonbalaj family, even though it was a very difficult case, and it took us more than six hours. There, we succeeded because the brother, Adriatik Gjonbalaj, Adriatik Gjonbalaj was really the son of the victim, forgave the blood of his father, and he immediately opened the radio station that we had at the time, *Zëri i Kosovës* [The Voice of Kosovo] in New York. Later [this forgiveness] was communicated also in church, in the mosque and everywhere else, and thus we continued with the reconciliation campaign.

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<sup>1</sup> Anton Çetta (1920-1995), folklore scholar.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Krasniqi (1920-2015), ethnographer and writer.

<sup>3</sup> Bajram Kelmendi (1937-1999) was a lawyer and human rights activist. He filed charges against Slobodan Milošević at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in 1998. On the first day of the NATO war in 1999, Serb police arrested him with his two children Kastriot and Kushtrim. Their bodies were found the next day.

<sup>4</sup> In Albanian customary law, *besa* is the word of honor, faith, trust, protection, truce, etc. It is a key instrument for regulating individual and collective behavior at times of conflict, and is connected to the sacredness of hospitality, or the unconditioned extension of protection to guests.

<sup>5</sup> *Kanun*, customary law, the unwritten law that regulates all aspects of life in the mountain areas of Northern Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro. A written version, the *Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini*, was compiled by the Franciscan monk Shtjefën Gjeçovi in 1910-1925.

<sup>6</sup> *Krushqi*, escort group from the groom's family that come to fetch the bride. In this case, *Krushqit e Pajtimit* are the group of activists reconciliators who go to fetch forgiveness.

After this we continued with the family Shabani and many, many other families that were in blood with each other. The group that lead the reconciliation of blood feuds undertook many actions during those days, when they reconciled not only blood, but also the small enmities that were there, some different questions and their number went up to about 80 reconciliations in New York. Afterwards, the group split and one part went to Detroit, and there were some reconciliations there, but not as many, though many people thought that in Detroit there were blood feuds, in reality it was not true, because in Detroit there were not as many cases as in New York.

In Detroit it seems to me only six families reconciled, while the others kept that previous *Besëlidhje së Malësisë*,<sup>7</sup> and in that sense professor Anton Çetta did not want to push further, to go farther, because that *besa* was linked to 1974, if I am not mistaken in Montenegro the Albanians of the *Malësia e Madhe*. This was part of the activity at that time, also many other people of the Albanian community collaborated on that activity. Later there was the support of the Albanian American Civic League headed by Joe DioGuardi and many and many fellow citizens who were here, who had information about families that were in enmity, came to tell us. Afterwards we prepared the trips of the group of the reconciliation of blood feuds, which split in two groups, one headed by Anton Çetta and the other by the member of the Academy Mark Krasniqi.

The group was rather large because 16 people came from Kosovo including Zikri Hasani, Bajram Kelmendi, Nekibe Kelmendi, professor doctor Agim Vinca, Mustafë Radoniq, the lawyer Adem Bajra, doctor Mustafë Logja and another number who were together with them there, I do not remember, Mulla Xhevat who was almost at the head of this delegation together with Anton Çetta and the member of the Academy Mark Krasniqi. The only one who could not come at the time was Don Lush Gjergj, because there was a meeting at the Vatican and he was invited, and he confirmed but was obliged to go to the Vatican with Ibrahim Rugova and canceled the visit to the United States of America. *If you ask me more questions probably things come to my mind you know?* [English]

**Anna Di Lellio:** How difficult was the work of the delegation?

**Besim Malota:** It was rather difficult, because the association Shpresa at the time was composed by a group of students. They were all workers who lived on their salary and the members of the association could not work a lot, but at the same time they all made sacrifices while being members, giving a great contribution to the association so they could come here, to reconcile blood feuds in the United States of America.

We are rather proud of all that happened because since then we have not had killing or vengeance. I mean, it was all almost extinguished once the case [reconciliation] happened in New York.

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<sup>7</sup> Literally, The League of Highlanders, it was held in Tuzla, Montenegro, in 1970. The League had two demands, to reconcile the blood feuds and eradicate the institution of vengeance.

The difficulties were with people when we went to their homes, because those who had victims, I mean, the family members of victims, did not understand that we were not looking for forgiveness in the name of the one who had committed the crime, but forgiveness was asked in the name of the nation, and not in the name of the one who had committed the crime. With the Gjonbalaj family it was very difficult, especially in the beginning. As I said earlier, it happened after six hours, because the entire delegation of 16 people and plus people from the community, that was then over 50 people, could not succeed in persuading the Gjonbalaj family to extend the hand of reconciliation.

At the end, Anton Çetta asked to meet with the mother of the victim, I mean, the victim was Dinqa Feta, according to the last name Din Gjonbalaj. Anton Çetta met with his mother, she was very ill, she was on her deathbed, and talked to her for 30 minutes, and in the end he asks her to extend the hand of reconciliation for her son, that she would not leave confusion in the family, that she would not continue with this kind of tradition.

And his mother really, even though 92 years old, forgave the blood of her son and asked her grandchildren, the sons of her sons, and the other son who was there, the brother of the victim, that they too did as she did, because she could not get up from her bed and give her hand to the other, because she was in a very bad condition and was very old. And thus, we succeeded in reconciling the first blood feud. After this, we had other cases that were very problematic killings.

We did not ask to tell us why they were killed, we were not interested in why were the killed, what pushed to the killing, who was the guilty one, we did not ask in any way about the guilty one, because we had not gone there to judge a killing, they would meet justice. We asked that they forgave, that once and for all blood vengeance ended. There were also enough difficulties, especially in Detroit. The case of Detroit was also more difficult because it was the blood of father and a son that was being forgiven. And I was not there, in Detroit. It was Tahir Nikçi, an activist of the association Shpresa, who led the group in Detroit, and that's how he told us about that family that he successfully reconciled.

The brother of the victim did not agree, it was really the brother and the son [of the victim] who had to forgive. The brother of the victim did not agree in any way, even though he had prepared a magnificent welcome, and highly praised the delegation, he said, "You are the head of the nation, you are great men," and even though there was a great pressure from Don Anton Kqira, the priest of the Catholic church of Detroit, who wanted that blood be forgiven at any cost. He finally said, "Here, nothing can be done." And after a few hours, his mother stood up and said to her son, "Yes son, all these men, you highly raised all these men, you brought them so high, and at the end you say no." She said, "This is not *burrnia*,<sup>8</sup> I am a woman, but the *besa* of God for my son speaks for itself." And she offered Anton Çetta her hand and said, "May the blood of my son be forgiven." But she did not mention the grandchild, because the grandchild was the son of her son, and she said, "Now it is your turn, I forgave my son, you must be forgiving your son." And that's how he also reconciled.

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<sup>8</sup> Literally, manhood, it refers to men who show courage, bravery and are worthy of their word.

We had very delicate cases here in the United States of America, cases of killings that occurred here and are not, were not imported, but occurred in the United States of America. Nevertheless they were closed with great success, and I hope we will not have such needs [again]. I am against feuds forgiveness now, I'm against going to ask people, "Forgive blood." People should be aware it is no longer the time of the *Kanun*, it is the time of the law, and the state should function and everything should be left to the law.

The victim should be punished according to the law, and people, the close family, should not be trapped. I hope that this very soon is understood also in Kosovo, especially in Albania, because there now the problem is much greater than in Kosovo. People know that the time of the *Kanun* is passed, the *Kanun* worked during the Ottoman Empire. Also because if explained in the right way, the *Kanun* was a diarchy during the Ottoman Empire, because Albanians never recognized the Ottoman Empire, only what the *Kanun* said, because Albanians solved their problems according to [their] customs and habits and not to the laws of Turkey. This is a form of diarchy or a parallel government that for 560 years Albanians have held against Turkey.

Now it is already obsolete and people should know that where there are laws, they must function, and not the *Kanun*, with all due respect to the great work that the *Kanun* is. I have read it several times and it is the most liberal law of that time. If we compare the *Kanun* laws, for example, with the English law or the law of other countries, it is much more liberal than the laws of other kingdoms in European countries. Yes, it is obsolete and the people must understand that now it is obsolete and they should not use the *Kanun*, nor be based on the *Kanun*.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Do you remember other cases of reconciliation in New York and Detroit?

**Besim Malota:** I was not in Detroit, it was the part of Tahir Nikçi, another colleague who is here in New York and lives here. He knows very well the cases of Detroit, while here we had some cases. I remember the case of the family of Mark Shabani and the Domgjoni family, two families from the municipality of Gjakova, but they both lived here at one point, they were friends. One murder happened in the family, the Domgjoni family really damaged the Shabani family. Earlier, here in the United States of America, there was a professor, Marian Shabani, who was killed by the Domgjoni family. Although he was the son-in-law in that family, there were problems between the families and it came down to murder.

Gjergj Domgjoni was also a member of the association Shpresa, and this case was one in which the association Shpresa was more engaged, because it was a member of the association Shpresa who was in a blood feud with the Shabani family. And this person always had to have a *besa* from the Shabani family in order to live freely in New York, because if he did not have *besa*, you know, he could not go out, could not go anywhere, was completely isolated. He usually went to work and returned from work, but could not come to the meetings, and this was exactly the reason why the association Shpresa took this case up, because we had a member who was in a blood feud, and because he was not a person who had committed a crime, but he was a member of that family.

We had this case of the Shabani family, we went to the Shabani family, we discussed personally with Mark Shabani, the brother of the victim Marian Shabani, we asked that he extend the hand of reconciliation, also because we could not succeed in persuading him by talking to him on the phone. In the end I asked, I said, "Marian [Mark], the Albanian custom is to open the door to anyone, we are coming tomorrow, we will be in church at 12 o'clock, after church will be at your house, so you should know that we are expected at home. And whether you forgive or not, come to an agreement or not, the custom is that you welcome us in your home, later you decide, we have our words, you, yours." Later, we went, we met, professor Anton Çetta told us that he had also been to his [Mark's] brother in Kosovo sometimes, and was not able to find an understanding, and he had not succeeded in reconciling the family in Kosovo.

We discussed with Mark Shabani, and he extended [the hand], but asked for one week to talk to the other part of the family in Kosovo. And after one week, actually after three or four, he called on the phone and said, "I expect you at my home on Saturday." Then I understood that this was an important job, and I notified Anton Çetta and the group that we would go to Mark Shabani's, because he had reached an agreement with his brother and he would give the final word. We had other cases here, some Vuthjane<sup>9</sup> who were in blood, they did not give us a good welcome, it was difficult when you went to a family because they did not welcome you with that nobility, saying, "Come in, welcome," but we were hardly asked to enter the house. We also had the case in which we were attacked at the door, we had a very bad case, they attacked us at the door of the house.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Yes, can you tell us?

**Besim Malota:** One of the brothers in the Ahmetaj family, one of the brothers was young, 20 years old, if I am not mistaken. While the other brother was in the room upstairs, when we came to the door, he was not uninformed, he was informed that we were coming...anyway, with all of us, one of the delegates was Mark Krasniqi. And after he rang the bell, he opens the door and when he opens the door he does not say, "Come in, please," but with a baseball bat he attacks him. Bajram Kelmendi, may he rest in peace, happened to be the second, and moved the professor behind him and stepped out and grabbed it, because Bajram was rather strong, grabbed the baseball bat. And afterwards we were a little shaken and the rest of us managed to move. His brother came out and saw what happened, the mess that had been created at the door, he slapped his brother, he was completely humiliated, asked us to go inside, but we were panicking a little and decided not to go inside before they talked as a family, but to come another time. In fact, we did not go, but in the evening the entire family came to us. We were located in New Jersey, in a hotel, and there was an Albanian restaurant there, Il Galletto, and in the evening they came to the Hotel, to Il Galletto, they met with us and forgave the blood. We had all kinds of cases.

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<sup>9</sup> The feminine form of referring to people coming from the village of Vuthaj.

In another case, in Greenwich Connecticut, they called the police, they called the police and sought the arrest of Anton Çetta, and the police really acted that way because they did not know what the problem was, and who those people were. I was there, the person who was there tells the police the reason why they went, and they say, "What?" He says, "Yes, because of this man who lives in Greenwich, a family in Kosovo is locked up and does not dare go out, nor take their children to school or do anything." And they say, "What is this?" and ask the one who had asked to arrest Anton Çetta. They say, "Why did you call us? These men are peaceful, it is not what you said, that they came to threaten you." The person who accompanied [the delegation] says, "No, *more*,<sup>10</sup> he didn't come to threaten, because this is a University professor, while the other is a very well-known lawyer in Kosovo." Bajram Kelmendi was with him. He says, "They did not come to threaten, but came for this reason." And they left, and we did not have any agreement with the man. He is from the Lekaj family, from the municipality of Deçan, the blood feud was there, and it was there where the Reconciliation began, when Hava Shala started [the campaign] with her group.

That blood is not forgiven even today, because that person has never agreed. He lives in Greenwich here in the United States of America, and was the person who wanted to arrest Anton Çetta, let alone forgive blood. We had various cases, then we had beatings, fights among people whom we had reconciled, we have not encountered any difficulty, the difficulty we encountered the most was with blood feuds. We had feuds even among different faiths, whether it was a Catholic who had killed or a Muslim who killed a Catholic, they have been a little more problematic because people instigated even more, but we managed to reconcile even those, but there in Detroit, there exists another kind of reconciliation because in 1974 if I'm not mistaken it was in Deqiq, near Tuzla, Deqiq is there, I'm not sure in Deqiq or Traboinë, it seems to me that in Traboinë there was a *lidhë besa*.<sup>11</sup> Professor Gjergj Gjokaj, from Tuzla, organized a kind of *besa* because at that time the Albanians in Montenegro...

**Anna Di Lellio:** In '40, 1940?

**Besim Malota:** In 1974.

**Anna Di Lellio:** In 1974, ok.

**Besim Malota:** It is called *Besëlidhja e Malësisë*, and he organized a completely different system, because he knew Albanians in Montenegro, than it is difficult to ask someone to forgive blood. He managed to convince, not to forgive blood, but however the rest of the family should be free. The son should be free, the wife, the brother and everyone else in the family except the one who performed the action, don't forgive him, but don't take the others. And he managed to get this *besa* and when he organized a kind of ceremony, then in those years every family had a representative of the family who agreed on a *besa*, that from now on in *Malësi* there is no revenge unless on the perpetrator, except on

<sup>10</sup> Colloquial: used to emphasize the sentence, it expresses strong emotion. *More* adds emphasis, like *bre*, similar to the English bro, brother.

<sup>11</sup> Temporary suspension of blood feuds, by agreement.



the one who did the deed, if you can kill the one who took the blood. If you killed the killer's son, you are not in *besa* in *Malësi* and you did not take out blood, but you fall in a new blood feud, if you kill the son or the brother or the cousin.

He achieved that kind of system there, which has been quite successful, because I have personally known professors Gjergj Gjoka and I asked him, "Why didn't you ask that they not take revenge?" And he says, "It is impossible, but I guarantee one thing, that revenge will never happen, because the victim, in reality the criminal who has committed a crime is going to prison for 15 years, when he comes out of prison exhausted, how many years can he lived, ten, nothing, he has done ten or 15," he says, "they are all dead," he says, "and extinguished, no more, he died, you cannot erase a death with a murder, you don't have blood."

They stand by the *besëlidhje* even today, the Albanians in Montenegro, who are in the vicinity of Tuz, they have the same system here in the United States, in Detroit or New York, wherever you are. We call them *Malësorë*,<sup>12</sup> wherever they are, if there's a murder, it happens especially in Detroit, there have been several murders, before you go to anyone's house to give condolence or the priest of the church goes, or goes the *kryeplak*<sup>13</sup> of the family and asks the head of the household, "Are you in the *Besë e Malësia*?" If he says no, no *Malësor* goes to the funeral, nor goes to pay a condolence visit, I mean, they ignore it completely. And none of them, everyone of them says, "Yes, I am in the *Besë e Malësia*," and so when he says, "I'm in the *Besë e Malësia*," the first people to go for condolence to these families are those who have committed the crime, the family of the person who has committed the crime, they are free to go. They go to the funeral, go to the home, go anywhere, meet each other, everything is okay. This is another form in my own opinion that should be practiced in Albania, because the biggest problem of blood feuds is in Albania today, it should be practiced but is not practiced anywhere.

**Anna Di Lellio:** But not in Kosovo, not in Kosovo now.

**Besim Malota:** In Kosovo some murders occurred later, but there they intervene more because there is still the group that was with Anton Çetta, such as Mulla Xhevat. I had the chance to participate in reconciliations in Kosovo after the war, with Mulla Xhevat and some others, I was there on vacation and Xhevat Mulla came and took me and we went to a reconciliation there in Kosovo and reconciled a family in Kosovo. Until this group exists it is a little easier, because they are people who have reconciled many feuds and people have respect for them, and still, you know, they accept their request to forgive blood or something else, but in Albania the issue of revenge is very problematic, very problematic.

<sup>12</sup> Literally mountain people but it can also be used to refer to people from *Malësia*, or *Malësi e Madhe* (literally Great Highlands), a region largely inhabited by Albanian speaking people, which lies to the East of Podgorica in modern day Montenegro, along the Lake of Shkodra in modern day Albania, next to Kosovo.

<sup>13</sup>The leader of *Pleqnarë* which has the same roots as *pleq*, elderly, traditionally the mediators in a blood feud reconciliation.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Yes, I know, I know.

**Besim Malota:** Then the interpretation of *Kanun*, each *lagje*<sup>14</sup> interprets the *Kanun* as they want. I mean, the *Kanun* applies as I say, they do not even deal with what is the *Kanun*, or what is customary law, which is collected by Shtjefën Gjeçovi, they don't deal with it. I have been in touch several times with those groups, those missions in Albania that work on reconciliation. Even they themselves are not interested, they are more interested in benefiting from those bloods than in reconciling them. When they go to someone's home, they go in the name of the *Kanun*, which is absurd, it is nonsense to go to someone and tell them, "I have come in the name of the *Kanun*." You should go and explain that today the time is different, there are state laws, the person who committed the crime is punished, and the others must be free, the others are not guilty, they are not accomplices, they must be free. No, they go in the name of the *Kanun*, and so keep people tied and locked up even today.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Yes.

**Besim Malota:** I am totally against those forms [of reconciliation], going in the name of the *Kanun* to forgive blood. You have to go and explain. I said earlier, even Anton Çetta and each of them did not ask for forgiveness on behalf of the *Kanun*, nor did they deal with customary law, that if you come to that customary law, you have a debt and it does not forgive you.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Do you remember the words of Anton Çetta or Kelmendi?

**Besim Malota:** In every case Anton Çetta, it was a large delegation and all spoke, in every case case, Anton Çetta, we began the most important part with Anton Çetta. We were divided into two groups, one led by academic Mark Krasniqi, and one by Anton Çetta. In every case he began, he began in the name of the youth, he apologized and explained why this should be done, why people should leave this path and he always said that they should no longer be based on the *Kanun*. The *Kanun* is not the one to say he must be locked up in the family, those were laws of the past, not laws of the present time. But every time he said that today is the moment in which we are in enmity with others and do not need to be in enmity with each other.

In Kosovo there were thousands of feuds, with thousands of reconciliations that happened in Kosovo, which means, according to a book that I read somewhere, there are 1200-1300 reconciliations. And if there are 1200-1300 reconciliations, we are talking of 1200-1300 families, we are talking about 200,000-300,000 people unnecessarily confined in prisons. And he always explained that this is the will of the youth, "We have not come on behalf of the one who has committed the crime, we have not come to say 'Forgive them,' but 'Forgive us, forgive the youth of Kosovo, forgive the people of Kosovo.'"

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<sup>14</sup> *Lagje* in this context means just neighborhood, but more specifically, in the traditional tribal organization of northern rural Albanians, it refers to a group of families sharing a common ancestor.

And here were his key moments, that he was able to convince people because he did not go in the name of the one who had committed the crime, but he was going in his name. Then started, "No, he did so, he did so, no, he said that, it happened for this reason." He did not even want to listen to them, "Don't tell me how those circumstances began," he said, he said, "No, I do not want to know, I did not come here as a judge to determine who is guilty, I do not care to know why it happened, I reconciled hundreds of feuds and nowhere did I ask. "

**Anna Di Lellio:** In America or in Kosovo?

**Besim Malota:** No, in America.

**Anna Di Lellio:** In America. How long was the campaign?

**Besim Malota:** Thirty days. They were here for thirty days, they stayed in the hotel because they were a large delegation. We moved every day from one place to another, you know, it was not very easy because we had to go to Kenrik, there, for some reconciliation, to Waterbury over in New Jersey, New York. The other group went to Detroit and they there, the Albanians in Detroit Michigan.

**Anna Di Lellio:** How much did it cost?

**Besim Malota:** It cost enough, the whole action at the time cost somewhere up to 130,000 dollars because we had very big expenses.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Who funded it?

**Besim Malota:** The association Shpresa funded it, the large part was funded by the association Shpresa, afterward we hosted a welcome dinner for the delegation of the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds and there was a very large number there, I think 500 or 600 people. The revenue of that dinner was also for the expenses that were made. At that time, apart from the Bytyqi brothers, the others only talked, because they did not contribute. But the Bytyqi brothers yes, Sergio Bytyqi contributed with his brothers, because he hosted a lunch at his Manhattan restaurant, Toscana.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Not Shaqir Gashi?

**Besim Malota:** Shaqir Gashi hosted a lunch at the beginning, but lunch was offered by anyone. People invited us in every place, this for lunch, that for dinner. But about material contribution, for example the Bytyqi brothers not only hosted the dinner, but invited guests and every guest paid 150 dollars for dinner. Those 150 dollars were not for the restaurant bill, but they gave it to the association, as a contribution of the Bytyqi brothers to help us in the campaign for reconciliation. I am not sure how much it was, but I know it was about one hundred and some people who were there and this was the only contribution that we had from Albanians in America.

The Albanian American Civic League welcomed us, but in the end withdrew and did not contribute a penny. We even had a disagreement with them because they also participated in the dinner, looking to get the proceeds of the dinner. We said, "Yes, are you by yourselves?" The greatest contribution was from the young people who were members of Shpresa. I appreciate them because only the members of the association Shpresa covered the costs. After all, whatever we had, I mean from what we collected from the dinner at the Bytyqi brothers, I cannot overlook the brothers Brumqaj because they had a higher cost, we had breakfast and dinner at their restaurant every day. But there was an agreement to pay, it was not free, but in the end Ali Brumqaj detracted 5000 dollars from the bill because, I know it, because I signed every day, and when I made the balance with him, he had removed 5000 dollars from the bill, we paid everything else.

**Anna Di Lellio:** How old were you?

**Besim Malota:** I was 23 at that time, I was almost the youngest in the delegation. At that time I was not even in the presidency of the association, but the leadership of the association took action focusing on the people they wanted to keep in the group, and I was leading the group. This is not a merit of mine, it was the merit of the association, the merit of all. Jakup Krasniqi was the chairman, Sami Sulejmani was the secretary of the association, then there was the leadership of the association who participated, and a certain group including me, Xhevat Kukaj who was also editor in chief of the radio, because then we had our Radio *Zëri e Kosovës* in New York. Tahir Nikçi, Riza Rugova and many others were part of that. For me it was just the chance that I was given.

**Anna Di Lellio:** When did you start Shpresa?

**Besim Malota:** Shpresa started in 1986.

**Anna Di Lellio:** 1986.

**Besim Malota:** I came here in America in 1986. When I came here in America there was only the national club Jusuf Gërvalla. There were also these other parties, the Balli Kombëtar,<sup>15</sup> the Second League of Prizren,<sup>16</sup> the Movement of the *Ilegalja*,<sup>17</sup> then some other parties that were independent. But there was much enmity among these groups, there was the greatest enmity, instead of fighting against Belgrade they were fighting among themselves. "Is he a leftist? Who is a Communist?" When I

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<sup>15</sup> *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.

<sup>16</sup> The Second League of Prizren was a nationalist movement whose ultimate goal was the establishment of Greater Albania. It was founded in Prizren in September, 1943.

<sup>17</sup> Constellation of underground militant groups fighting for Kosovo separation from Yugoslavia and unification with Albania during Tito's Yugoslavia.

came, I joined the national club Jusuf Gërvalla because there I found the majority and it is true that the national club Jusuf Gërvalla was under the influence of Albania.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Why?

**Besim Malota:** It was under the influence of the permanent Mission [of the Republic of Albania] to the UN and they did not make any move other than those actions directed by the mission of Albania, on how to organize and what to do. I did not stay long, I saw much unhappiness among the people, because the Kosovo question should not have been mixed with the issue of Albania. There everything was mixed, it became some form of hatred spread among the members, who is from Albania is a traitor, no, who is from Kosovo and does not come with us is a Serb. They spread hatred in the community, especially their leadership, they introduced a kind of hatred in the community. I immediately saw the dissatisfaction, I met with some of the youth, most of whom were the many students who had come from Kosovo, people who had come and were also active there. And we discussed the ways.. For example, had I liked Marxism-Leninism I would have gone to Albania, not America. Had we liked that kind of system we would be very close to Albania, and this was the reason why the association Shpresa started. I was precisely that division.

**Anna Di Lellio:** All Kosovars?

**Besim Malota:** No, there were not all Kosovars. We had people from all corners, they were from *Malësia*, Vuthaj, there were many from Dibra. There were many people from Dibra who participated in the association Shpresa, there were Kosovars, but there were all those who did not agree to be under the influence of the Albanian Mission, but we must be free to operate independently. We know what are the demands of Kosovo, because we had just come from where the demands originate, and we did not need to come here and hear those who had no connection with Kosovo tell us what the Republic of Kosovo must say, or how to act, or how should we work. Then the Albanian American Civic League began, we were the right-wing of the Albanian Civic League and we supported the majority of the Albanian American Civic League, until it grew a little bigger.

Then these political parties that erased all the associations began. And the establishment of political parties in the United States of America was a big mistake, because you cannot establish a party in another state. The party in Kosovo, its branch in America, it is absurd, unacceptable. We discussed this case, we discussed with the late Dr. Ibrahim Rugova, we met him several times. It was against the establishment of the Democratic League of Kosovo [LDK].<sup>18</sup>

But the Democratic League of Kosovo in New York is founded by doctor Ali Aliu. And he did not want to listen, at the time we knew that there was no kind of interest in founding LDK in New York, but there

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<sup>18</sup> *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* - Democratic League of Kosovo. First political party of Kosovo, founded in 1989, when the autonomy of Kosovo was revoked, by a group of journalists and intellectuals. The LDK quickly became a party-state, gathering all Albanians, and remained the only party until 1999.

was interest in collecting funds, and at the time we told Rugova too and Ali Aliu. We, as a community, pledge 300,000 dollars a year, and we send 300,000 dollars, but don't found a party here because it divides the community. In the beginning it was very active, they succeeded, but where are they today? They have all disappeared. They destroyed the associations and in the end they were destroyed as well, because those from the rank and file destroyed it, because they did not have their interests here. And they did not have need for the party here. And they did not deal with them. This was a very big mistake, very obvious.

**Anna Di Lellio:** What was your job at the time?

**Besim Malota:** At the time I was, I worked at NYU Hospital, I was a *doorman* [English]. Later I was *supervisor* [English] of the maintenance there at the time. When we arrived here it was impossible, because we all arrived with debts. And we were forced to begin to work, it was impossible to continue studying because of the conditions in which we were at the time. And the Albanian community did not have money, it was organized to help the youth when we arrived at the time, I mean, we found a way to help those who were coming from there to continue studying a little here, there was no money, there was no type of activity in that direction. You had to work to support yourself and your family.

So, now the situation is different, the situation is much better, although now they are adults, people who are here are aware, it shows also from the education of our children who have gone much farther. When I came here I found [the community] very backward. With all due respect, they worked, they managed to create wealth, but did not succeed in educating their children. For many parents it was more reasonable to send a son to make pizza after high school than send him to university somewhere. It was more reasonable that he brought 50 dollars home than send him somewhere to get educated and it was a very big mistake on our part here. Because when we came here in New York there was no Albanian lawyer. There was none when I came here.

**Anna Di Lellio:** [Not] One?

**Besim Malota:** Not one. Zero. Today they are 60-70. All this was because of the arrival of a new immigration from Kosovo, who came from having studied, they had a different role because they were schooled, they knew that you can become wealthy but if you don't educate your children you are nowhere, you will stay nowhere later on. The greatest wealth is the education of your children, and this began to make the community grow a lot.

**Anna Di Lellio:** I have a question. How and when did you have the idea of inviting the delegation to America? How and when?

**Besim Malota:** Yes, the idea was born immediately after the beginning of the Action in Kosovo, because we saw it was the case that one of the members of our leadership was precisely Gjergj Domgjonaj who was in blood with the Shabani family. And someone always had to intercede with their family to get a *besa*. Or someone had to go and pick up Gjergj at home and it was ok if he got in

anyone's car, nobody would kill him because he was in the *besa* of that person who was with him. Or we often had to take him home, and he missed activities.

This was how the association had the idea, then we worked and estimated how much it would cost, how do we, what would the association's budget be. We took a lot of money from the budget of the association, at that time there were only two airlines that travelled to the former Yugoslavia, one was in Belgrade, where JAT went, and the other was PANAM going to Zagreb. Tickets were extremely expensive, I know, at the time we paid anywhere from \$1,600 per person, each ticket. They are much cheaper today than they were then, because there were only two airlines and especially airlines had the monopoly of prices. People did not travel so much. The association covered the budget of the tickets, the budget for the accommodation, then it had prepaid the hotel because the hotel cannot wait until you bring money, but you must pay in advance. Two members of the association gave their credit cards to the hotel so the hotel budget is set and expenses were very high. And all of them are arranged before and it took two months. Then we consulted the group there.

**Anna Di Lellio:** [Did you consult] with Anton Çetta?

**Besim Malota:** There it was led entirely by the member of the Academy Mark Krasniqi. They decided who would come, we went from that format, that they had to be from all the [Albanian populated] territories, not only one country, because here we have a very mixed community. And we managed to have them from Macedonia, there was professor Dr. Agim Vinca, who had not dealt with reconciliation in Kosovo at all, the only Action Reconciliation of Blood Feuds in which he participated was in America, Agim Vinca. Others were part of the reconciliation almost from all sides, but Agim Vinca participated in the reconciliation only in the United States. Even when he returned there [to Kosovo] he did not, because he admitted he was invited only because he was from Macedonia.

And here we have a community of many thousands of Albanians from Macedonia, professor Tomë Berisha, since deceased, he came from Zagreb, Gjergj Gjokaj who came from *Malësia*, I mentioned earlier Gjergj Gjokaj, I mean, we did not have to intervene in the *besëlidhje* that George Gjokaj created. We left, we did not touch at all those families that were in that kind of *besëlidhje*, because everyone was saying that in Detroit there are more than 200-300 families, but when the late honorable professor George Gjokaj came, based on a list, because I had all these, he said, "These are important situations and we should not intervene in them because they stand behind this *besëlidhje* and it is long term, not just here, but it's long-term." If tomorrow it happens that someone from these same people go and say, "Are you in *besë* in *Malësia*?" Yes or no, two words. If he says, "There is, I mean, no vengeance there," there we did not touch anything. There were two months of preparation, then they came, they stayed 30 days here, and after 30 days they returned to Kosovo.

## Part Two

**Anna Di Lellio:** Can you talk about the role of women in the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds?



**Besim Malota:** Yes, even here in New York, in the delegation three were also women who came from Kosovo, there was the late Nekibe Kelmendi, the wife of Bajram Kelmendi, then in the association here there were women, they were also in the organization, there were Hatixhe Nikçi, Zoja Ahmetaj. There were cases where the word of Nekibe Kelmendi was worth more than the word of all the others, she asked especially on behalf of mothers. She said, "You are a mother, stand up and forgive." And we achieved, during the organization, to have enough women together, in particular there was also Shqipe Biba, who was active at that time with us, coming almost everywhere, she participated with us everywhere. The role of reconciliation belongs more to the men who led, but the reality is that it was started by women.

Hava Shala is precisely who began it in Kosovo, it was not Anton Çetta or academic Mark Krasniqi or another, but it started exactly from Hava Shala with a group of young girls who were at that time former political prisoners. Because Hava Shala is my generation and she went to prison almost at the same time, a little later than I did. I was released when she was arrested, but she is of the same generation and I know that for several years she was a political prisoner in Kosovo. Later, after being released from prison, she helped her people again and started the Action of Reconciliation of Blood Feuds with her friends and some young guys who joined. They encountered difficulties immediately, they did not know the format, they did not know the customs, they did not know, they had no knowledge.

They went and sought help, they actually went and sought the help of the member of the Academy Mark Krasniqi, and he resorted to Anton Çetta. I mean, Anton is the one who knew this more than anyone else, and Academic Krasniqi always said to me that Anton Çetta was always taken by this field. He was a man who researched this, and he directed them to him, and he did very well to address them to him because it [the initiative] then took the size of a movement, a movement of reconciliation which achieved a major success, in Kosovo and also here in the United States of America. I am not aware of Europe, but here I know it achieved a major success.

The role of women has been very active, especially in the association Shpresa it has always been active, because in the association Shpresa there has always a.. in the statute of the association there was the provision that there had to be at least one third of females in the leadership of the association. Women have always been even in the leadership of the association, as the president and as member of the board. The association also had the Presidency Council. The Council stayed in place between the two assemblies of the association.

Among those with the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds, in the group that was there, Mulla Xhevat was very active, Mulla Xhevat Kryeziu. I have known Xhevat Mulla before his arrival in the United States of America, because we are almost from the same area, from the same place. I'm from Klina, he is from Bubavec, which was part of Klina when I was in Kosovo. Malisheva was not a municipality, Klina was the municipality. I know Mulla Xhevat since then, and when he came here he was also very active. He



managed to be everywhere, there was a very great will in that direction, to combat that phenomenon, to remove it, that there be no fratricide, that fratricide disappeared.

He even went so far that Anton Çetta told me a story about him, I mean, “When we went to the reconciliation in Bubavec, on the door of the mosque was written, “Don’t look to church or mosque, the faith of Albanians is Albanianism.”<sup>19</sup> Even Mark, then Bajram Kelmendi and others who were part of that delegation that went to Bubavec, called and asked, ‘Mulla Xhevat, are you yourself? Are you sane?’ He says, ‘Why?’ They say, ‘How come on the door of the mosque it’s written, leave the churches and leave the mosques, the faith of Albanians is Albanianism?’ He says, ‘This is a mosque, are you saying that people should not enter the mosque?’” Because Mulla Xhevat is a very big nationalist, a patriot, he has no religion above the nation, even though he is a clergy. I respect him for being very religious and he preaches his faith, but for him the nation is above religion. The nation comes before it all.

I had several conversations with him, and I know him personally, so that the nation is more important to him than anything else. Here, too, he has been very active, even here he was asked by everyone. Then there was that time when our community was still almost a little too divided. They achieved, this delegation not only reconciled these blood feuds of the dead, but also managed to reconcile the survivors, because they managed to silence the dilemma, this is Enverist,<sup>20</sup> this is a *Ballist*,<sup>21</sup> this is a Titoist.<sup>22</sup> He managed to tell everyone that, "You are all Albanians, nowadays our only enemies are the Serbs and not others. Therefore you should be all united, the fight should be against Belgrade and not against each other here in the community.”

It was the biggest success that in reality this group achieved in America, the reconciliation of the living, and it is often said that we need to reconcile the living more than the dead. Here in America we encountered more problems among the living than those who were killed or in blood feuds. And it has been its success, because the community, after they left, managed to be one hundred percent more united, putting aside partisan ideologies, dropping them. The community is united more and more. Before we succeeded, for example, we had 2,000 people at the biggest demonstration, while after the

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<sup>19</sup> The line quoted is from Pashko Vasa’s poem, “O Moj Shqypni” [Oh Albania, Poor Albania]. It is the most influential and popular poem in Albanian language. Pashko Vasa (1825 - 1892) also known as Vaso Pasha or Vaso Pashë Shkodrani, was an Albanian writer, poet and publicist of the Albanian National Awakening, and Governor of Lebanon from 1882 until his death. Most of Vasa’s publication were in French and Italian.

<sup>20</sup> Supporter of Enver Hoxha, Leader of the Albanian Communist Party who ruled Albania as a dictator until his death in 1985. In this context, pro-Albania.

<sup>21</sup> Member or supporter of *Balli Kombëtar* (National Front), 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. In this context, supporter of unification of Kosovo with Albania.

<sup>22</sup> Supporter of Josip Broz Tito, President of Yugoslavia from 1945 to his death in 1980. In this context, pro-Yugoslavia.

reconciliations that were done here, the protests were held with 10,000-15,000 people who went to the demonstrations, the protests.

The place was divided, I mean, it was the success that they obtained, because they always met with groups, with all groups here, not only for the reconciliation of blood feuds, but other groups too, for example, with *Ilegalja*, *Balli Kombëtar*, the *Blloku Independent* is called, the Second League of Prizren, with Shpresa, the national club Jusuf Gërvalla, that they all unite. And it was always their requirement that everyone must be supportive of the Albanian Club, the Albanian American League, because at that time it was DioGuardi<sup>23</sup> who lobbied a lot in the United States on the issue of Kosovo and its merits are undeniable. DioGuardi's merits are enormous in terms of the recognition of Kosovo in the United States.

Kosovo is not known at all in America. In Washington they don't know where it is, I am not saying at the State Department, it is normal that they knew. I remember in 1987, when the first meeting was held in Washington, none of Congressmen had any idea where Kosovo is, and each of them asks, "Is it in Russia? Is it there, is it there." When it was explained to them that it was in Yugoslavia, it is between Albania and Yugoslavia, "We never heard of it." Urging support against the violation of human rights, I mean, there was one person, DioGuardi, who first opened the issue of Kosovo in Washington. Later there are others who helped a lot, such as Congressman Eliot Engel, but the one who started it was DioGuardi and the lobbying that DioGuardi did is something that has been pretty incredible, in such short time the Kosovo issue went so up in Washington, and became almost a priority in Washington.

There are thousands of problems such as Kosovo around the world, there are thousands of problems such as Kosovo and people do not even know where those places are. Kosovo has a lot of population around the world, it has a lot. Albanians in America in that regard are well organized also through DioGuardi's success. Also here it should be emphasized that the greater merit is of the national club Jusuf Gërvalla, because the national club Jusuf Gërvalla came into contact with DioGuardi through their members, and one of their members said that DioGuardi is Albanian. It was incredible that an Albanian was a Congressman and they met with him and asked him, and he has started since. The first people who introduced DioGuardi to the community and who supported DioGuardi have been the national club Jusuf Gërvalla, then the others, especially the association Shpresa has been the right arm until the 1990s, until the establishment of the Democratic League of Kosovo, there he had problem with their support.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Now Shpresa does not exist?

**Besim Malota:** Shpresa now exists only as a name and as a corporation, but it is not active, although a group of friends is trying to reactivate it, but I do not know, it is not active. I talked with the group that is trying to reactivate it, and is very bad that it is not active, it is a big loss, because there is no

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<sup>23</sup> Joseph J. DioGuardi (1940 -) former Republican Congressman from New York of Italian-Albanian origins, one of the first lobbyist in the US for the cause of Albanians in Kosovo.

association. We have no association in New York. We have local associations, the association Rugova, the association Plav Guci, but they are local and are not as comprehensive as Shpresa was. Shpresa is not an association limited to a territory, but it was an association for all sides, and it was a cultural and political association, because at the time we had to move in that direction. If there had to be an association in New York, it had to be a cultural association, now we do not need it, because Kosovo has a government, we do not need to do the job of the government. We do not need to go to Washington to deal with the issue of Kosovo because it is our Ambassador dealing with the problem. Albania too has its Embassy to deal with that problem. We need it, I am talking about Albanians in Montenegro, the Albanians in Serbia or Macedonia, but not for the Kosovo issue. If there had to be an association, it should have been a cultural association, to promote culture.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Books.

**Besim Malota:** Publication of books. The association Shpresa at that time had a library of some 10,000 books.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Where?

**Besim Malota:** We had them there in the association. We had over 10,000 books in the association's library. I said earlier that the association Shpresa was established by a group of students. All the people who fled Kosovo for political reasons. And they were all people who left school and they were people who read. And we found in Brooklyn there a place where a man packed all those books.

**Anna Di Lellio:** No!

**Besim Malota:** All packed and we went and we agreed with him and we took all from him. There were about 10,000 books that we took from him. He really brought from Albania all those books, but had to spread the books, but they were not taken. He brought them and kept them there, and he has a company there, it is called Volurufin.

**Anna Di Lellio:** In Florida? [sic.]

**Besim Malota:** They are all packed there. They were all full of dust. I went and asked and took everything from them. We had an association, later there in the association there were also those duplicates of several authors. People took, they really bought from the association those that were on sale. Once we no longer had the opportunity to continue where we had the premise, because the association has had its own premises, they were sent to the Albanian school in Staten Island. They were given to the Albanian school in....

**Anna Di Lellio:** To the library.

**Besim Malota:** They are all given to the Albanian school, except mine that were personal, I have them at home, because I had mine also, my personal [books] and I collected them and brought them to my home. And I have them today, I continue to have them.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Something else about the Reconciliation in America?

**Besim Malota:** I do not know what to add to the Reconciliation in America.

**Anna Di Lellio:** More stories.

**Besim Malota:** More, I do not know what they were.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Cases.

**Besim Malota:** There were thirty daily, it was quite big. There are also others in that group who spoke. We had support from many, moral support. Moral support and material support are two different things. We did not have material support from people, but moral support yes, there were people who collaborated all the time. They have to help, someone to send us there by car, or to carry us, or something, or there were these elders who came with us to many places. We got more or less those who were older, who knew people, were familiar with our customs, knew our habits.

We had a case in Brooklyn, which was unexpected for us, because we had gone in the name of the Albanian people to ask for forgiveness. They come from the Alzhanica region in Montenegro. When they came to reconcile, one of the brothers stands up and gives his hand to Mark Krasniqi and says, "On my behalf, and on behalf of the Muslim people, I forgive my brother's blood." No one speaks, the boy's paternal uncle stands up and says, "This shows how far the enemy got." He says, "He does not know two Albanian words," he said, "because where he was raised, he did not have rights, and at the school where he went, he was told, 'You are not Albanian, you are Muslim'." He says, "This shows how far we got." This was Shpend Haxha, a very popular figure in New York, who was the first cousin of the one who forgave the blood.

The late Bajram Kelmendi stood up and began to recite the *Lahuta e Malcis*,<sup>24</sup> by Father Gjergj Fishta. He mentioned the grandfather of the one who spoke, the one who said, "On behalf of the Muslim people." In the *Lahuta e Malcis* his grandfather is mentioned, and [Kelmendi] recited that part of the war of Nikšić, where his grandfather was one of the leaders in the fight against Montenegrins, and then he sat down. He sat down and said, "This is misery. This is forgiveness, okay. So he did, he forgave, but the misery is in the situation our people are in, where the enemy has led us to erase this. On behalf of

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<sup>24</sup> *Lahuta e Malcis*, an epic poem written in Gheg dialect of Albanian, was completed and published in 1937 by Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940) an Albanian Franciscan brother, a poet, an educator, a politician, and a national hero. Notably he was the chairman of the commission of the Congress of Monastir, which sanctioned the Albanian alphabet. In 1921 he became the Vice President of the Albanian Parliament.

the Muslim people! Where is a Muslim nation? Where are Muslim people? Albanians can be divided into Muslims, Catholics and Orthodox. Albanians are an ethnic, not a religious group. As Albanian, they are an ethnicity, and not a religious group.”

When we left, we all laughed. We all laughed. He forgave, ok, he forgave and the family reconciled, they were Albanians, they spoke Albanian and the one who forgave did not speak Albanian. He even said, in Serbian, that they speak the Muslim language, but there is no Muslim language. There is the Serbian language and the Croatian language, because there is no Montenegrin language and there is no Muslim language. There are dialects, but not languages. They are almost like the Slavic languages, like one or the other. A Muslim language? No language is Muslim, it is the Serbian language. He said it in a way that when we went out, we were all laughing. But we did not go there to ask for forgiveness as Muslims. But it was good and it is in the past.

We have had several cases of every kind. We had a case that forgave three in Brooklyn. It forgave three sons in Brooklyn, it was a family. They were from Luma, from Albania. There were no major problems there, even though they were not from Kosovo, we did not know exactly where he was from. He is from *Malësia* or from Kosovo, only he is an Albanian. Whether from Albania, Kosovo we went to everyone no matter where he comes from. The Reconciliation in New York was not of the Kosovars. There were all Albanians in general. There were one case, for example from Luma, from Albania, who forgave. Another case was from Peshkopi, the area of Dibra or little Dibra as we say, who forgave. We had some cases from Gusia and Plav there. Cases from the *Malësia e Madhe*, from Ulcinj, then the cases of Kosovo and all these, we went to all in the name of Albanianism. And from everyone we asked on behalf of the Albanian people, whether they were from Kosovo or from there. Look at the situation where we are, be aware of what is waiting for us. Why are we also in this kind of enmity, why we continue this kind of enmity? There have been quite such things. It was thirty days, I cannot remember it.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Every day?

**Besim Malota:** Every day there was activity.

**Anna Di Lellio:** What was the most difficult?

**Besim Malota:** In truth, the most difficult cases were those that were the easiest, that were almost confusing, they were more difficult than those that were the biggest. Where we expected it would very difficult, we had an easier pass, where we expected less than nothing, we had it a lot worse. Because there were reluctant people, "No, we do not forgive. No, he has done so to me." But we came to ask, we were not judges, even though we had lawyers with us, because we had three lawyers. There was the late Bajram Kelmendi, the late Adam Bajra and there was Mustafa Radoniq. He is a lawyer today too, Mustafa Radoniq, he is there in Peja. Three were lawyers, but we said, "We did not come to judge the case here, nor to ask why it was done or why it is not done."

We had a case, where they cut someone in the face. And he said, "If I forgive, will it remove these?" There were some scars on the face, where they had cut him. He also fell during that scuffle. That was a case that lasted a very long time and he did not agree [to forgive] in any way. Xhavit Kabashi, one of the members of our group, Shpresa, listened to him, he was a friend of that person. He was a friend and they had also spent quite a long time together. He listened to him and did not intervene. Once he saw us, the whole group, getting tired from dealing with that man for four hours, he stood up, Xhavit, and he approaches Anton Çetta and says, "Professor." And he says, "Yes, Kabash." "Give me that hand." He gives his hand. "It's yours! Who is asking for this?" People [said], "Xhavit, slow down!" "Who is asking? More, this one blabbered, this one blabbered for four hours, but he has no conscience. He fled from Kosovo, was convicted there, he left with me. We came here. Instead of being the first [to reconcile], he brings us trouble, 'Who removes this?' Go to the doctor and get surgery. You don't expect us to pay, now, do you? Pay for it yourself if you have the money and if not, stay that way, you're good enough. You have a wife, you have kids. Don't bother me anymore!" Everyone breaks into laughter. He says, "Big deal." After a while, he had no exit and so he stood up and reached out with his hand, and said, "Since he forgave, there's nothing I can do." And [Kabashi] said, "Not only do I forgive," he said, "tell them that he has me to confront, I owe him, not they. He should deal with me," he says. He stood too, and gave his hand to him and said, "Professor, forgiven it is." We had all sorts of cases.

**Anna Di Lellio:** *It was also fun.* [English]

**Besim Malota:** *It was, it really was.* [English] We met people whom we had never seen before. But we have a case in New York that did not forgive blood. It is a case that is not reconciled, that did not welcome us. And he was a prominent activist and today he keeps himself up as an activist in the name of the national cause. Yes, he did not agree, even though I sent several times Metë Bajraktari as an intermediary to talk with the family, because they are friends. That family did not forgive. We did not reach an agreement with the Osmani family in New York. They have a murder here in New York, and there is no agreement reached with them. We dropped it, because we saw that it was in vain, and the group couldn't stop here, with a family, for thirty days. They do not want to forgive, do not want to forgive. But the group did not expect that, because at that time one of the family members was very active in the Albanian American Civic League, he was in the presidency and dealt with the national issue, with all [the issues], and we did not expect to be in such situation. "I should be given more time." "Yes, how can we give you time? This is costing us." We had to send [the delegation] back to Kosovo and we never went there again, and [the case] remained dormant.

The only family that did not forgive was the Osmani family. All others, they told us each case, because we had no idea what they all are. We had the idea for around ten cases, but not more. At the end, I am not wrong, there are 43 only in New York. Plus in Detroit that are a few reconciliations, when it was all done. For it began as people came and gave us information, "Such and such, such and such family, they live in Staten Island, live in Queens, live in Brooklyn." Then we had to be into contact with them, someone had to take over, it was more my obligation.

**Anna Di Lellio:** The obligation with families and work?

**Besim Malota:** The family of the one whose house we had to go to. We had to pick up the phone and contact them. "Who are you?" I had a case when I was in the restaurant eating dinner, someone asked who is Besim, they showed him, he came, "He abused me, he hit me, he came to the house to kill me." There were quite of these situations, but we did not take them into account because there was a greater will to reconcile the most important cases than what this ore that is saying. We had quite of these. Thirty days were a very long time. This was last case. We were eating breakfast, they had to travel on Monday, it was Sunday, they all had to travel to Kosovo on Monday. And now, during that morning, we closed all [business]: where we were, who, and the minutes that they took with them to Kosovo, the minutes taken in each reconciliation case - where did we go, who spoke, what was said? They took these with them, they asked, we gave [these] to them and they took these.

He says, "We have," says Anton Çetta, "another case." They say, "Where, who called you? We thought that we had done, we have no record anywhere." "No," he said, "I know." "Professor, where do you want us to go?" He stood up, said, "We will go to Besim's." I was married at the time, I believe I had been married for one year. And he stood up and said, "We will go to Besim's, because there too we must reconcile someone." I said, "With whom do you want me to reconcile?" He said, "With your wife," he said, "thirty days up and down, she has the right to kick you out of the house." He said, "You too now go to Kosovo with them!" He said, "We are coming to reconcile you with your wife because this work must be completed as well." I said, "Ok," I said, "Come to my place for dinner tonight." He said, "Yes, definitely." And that was it, they all came to my place for dinner in the evening, my house was, then I lived in Queens. I also had family, my father, brothers, mother, we lived all together.

My house was in Queens and we went there for dinner, and when he came in he told my wife, "Hana, we came to reconcile you with your husband because tomorrow I have to go to Kosovo, so I reconcile even you two." She says, "But we do not have any problem." He says, "Eh, thirty days, don't I know what will you say to him when we are gone? You will say, 'As a thug, you took the streets, you went up and down, and left me alone.'" Although she often came along. In some cases she came, not to the reconciliations, but to dinners, meetings, she came when we travel to Boston. The delegation they all knew my wife because they had met her several times, in some cases she often accompanied Nekibe, Nekibe Kelmendi, my wife came along. The there were those two who were in the leadership of the association, they came almost every day, Zoje Ahmetaj, and forgive me, Nushe Ahmetaj, and Hatixhe Nikçi, they came almost every day in the meeting with Nekibe, they came to different places. I do not know what to say anymore, it has been a very long time.

**Anna Di Lellio:** Very good.