

INTERVIEW WITH MYRVETE DRESHAJ

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Duration: 106 minutes

Present:

1. Myrvete Dreshaj (Speaker)
2. Fehmi Hajra (Interviewer)

This interview was conducted by KCGS - Kosovo Center for Gender Studies

Fehmi Hajra: I would start the interview by talking about your childhood. Can you please tell us where you were born?

Myrvete Dreshaj: My name is Myrvete Dreshaj, now also Baliu. I was born in the village of Vrellë, in Istog, in 1966.

Fehmi Hajra: Where did you grow up?

Myrvete Dreshaj: I was born in Vrellë, while I grew up and was educated in Peja.

Fehmi Hajra: Can you please tell us what did your parents do?

Myrvete Dreshaj: My mother was a housewife, but an educated housewife for the time, because she had finished elementary school, but of course she didn't continue because we know the circumstances of that time, and what the *rreth*¹ of the village expected from the education of women. But that was the foundation for my life and the reason to love school and know the worth of education. On the other hand, my father was an immigrant for almost four or five years after I was born. I mean, I grew up with my mother, my mother's lessons, more than my father's.

Fehmi Hajra: Can you tell us about the education of your parents? You mentioned your mother a little...

Myrvete Dreshaj: I mentioned my mother, I mean, she loved education even though a housewife, she transmitted that feeling to us in order for us to keep her holiest and very last *amanet*.² My father was an immigrant for almost all my mother's lifetime. Here, I mean in Kosovo, he finished two years of gymnasium,³ while as an immigrant he continued and finished the whole middle school, I mean, during immigration, there were additional classes organized for workers with temporary jobs, he finished middle school and then he didn't hesitate to invest in our education because he loved

¹ *Rreth* (circle) is the social circle, it includes not only the family but also the people with whom an individual is in contact. The opinion of the *rreth* is crucial in defining one's reputation.

² *Amanet* is literally the last will, but in the Albanian oral tradition it has a sacred value.

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

education very much, and felt the need to root it in us, and reach his own aspiration through his children, especially through me, as the oldest child.

Fehmi Hajra: You mentioned your own education. Can you tell us about your education?

Myrvete Dreshaj: I finished elementary school in Peja, at the Xhemajl Kada school. My house was near. Then I finished the gymnasium 11 Maji [May 11] in Peja as well.

When I talk about elementary school, it is something nice, free and very impressive, while when I enter middle school, my political, illegal and national activity starts, call it the way you want, whichever term you find more appropriate. And that is where something totally different starts, not only education but also my general preoccupation and engagement, just as one among other Albanians fighting for freedom. Of course, I was very very young, but my mother, whom I talked about earlier, and who has been deceased for 23 years now, listened to Radio Kukësi at the time when I couldn't even understand what a radio rather than Radio Pristina meant.

Of course, that radio had a distribution of frequencies back then...and through it, more than everywhere else, I learned about our history and the tragic destiny of our separation [of Kosovo from Albania]. When there were shows about many historical personalities, she would say, "Ah, this one is about Ismail Qemali,⁴ listen to how beautifully they speak; this one is about Mic Sokoli,⁵ Bajram Curri,⁶ Isa Boletini⁷ and so on," I mean, all of these, so this is the very beginning of my familiarization with national personalities who worked for the cause of Kosovo, it was my mother's influence.

But above all, as a child, I remember that in the *pajë*⁸ trunk she always kept the book *Kosova: djep i shqiptarizmit* [Kosovo: the cradle of Albanianism] written by Hamit Kokallari. My mother covered its

⁴ Ismail Qemal Bej Vlora (1844-1919), better known as Ismail Qemali, Ottoman civil servant and prominent politician, a leader of the Albanian national movement and a main figure in the Declaration of Albanian Independence in 1912.

⁵ Mic Sokoli (1839-1881) was an Albanian nationalist figure and guerrilla fighter from the Tropoja district in today's Northern Albania. He was a noted guerrilla leader, remembered in particular for an act that has entered the chronicles of Albanian legend as an example of heroism: at the battle of Slivova against Ottoman forces in April 1881, he died when he pressed his body against the mouth of a Turkish cannon.

⁶ Bajram Curri (1862-1925) was an Albanian chieftain, politician and activist who struggled for the independence of Albania, later fighting for Kosovo's unification with Albania, following the 1913 Treaty of London.

⁷ Isa Boletini (1864-1916), an Albanian nationalist figure and guerrilla fighter. He was one of the leaders of the 1910 Albanian Revolt in the Kosovo *Vilajet* and became a major figure of Albanian struggle against the Ottomans and Serbia and Montenegro. His remains, originally buried in Podgorica where he was killed, were reburied in the village of Boletin, in the northern side of Mitrovica, in June 2015.

⁸ Bride's trousseau.

cover, because of safety issues, and when I took it and removed the covers, I would ask tens of questions, because it had the half-headed eagle printed on it, I mean it was only half of our flag.

She would often say, “Don’t touch it, you are not allowed to touch it because it is forbidden and don’t tell anyone that I have it here.” “Alright,” I’d say, “Our flag has the two wings of the eagle, why is there only half of it here?” And she would say, “You will understand it when you grow up.” I always felt like my mother kept something hostage in her box together with her *qeiz*.⁹

And later my father, as an immigrant who loved his nation and still loves his nation, understood the Kosovo and the Albanian cause in former Yugoslavia very well, and he brought literature from Germany. I remember as if it was today, the book *Tradhtarët* [Traitors], then *Titistët* [The Titists], *Shtypi Botëror Rreth Ngjarjeve në Kosovë* [The International Press on Kosovo Events], *Mbi Ngjarjet në Kosovë* [On Kosovo Events] and so on. Then he brought the illustrated magazine *Shqipëria e Re* [The New Albania] as well as emblems and various national signs, all of these right after the events of 1981.

My mother took very good care of them, and of course after I was aware enough of the value of those books, I took them out of my mother’s trunk, I read them and took notes in my notebooks and gave them to my school friends and that is where the first steps of an illegal¹⁰ cell of organization began.

Fehmi Hajra: Then you started University?

Myrvete Dreshaj: I have a couple of challenges until here...

Fehmi Hajra: You had a break after high school?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Yes, it is true, I had a break...

Fehmi Hajra: We will talk later about that.

Myrvete Dreshaj: Yes. Alright.

Fehmi Hajra: Then you continued your studies?

Myrvete Dreshaj: After being a political prisoner, I continued my studies, I mean, it was not easy to continue my studies because enrolling in a faculty of the University of Pristina at the time, when

⁹ Clothes and embroideries that fill up the bride’s trousseau.

¹⁰ *Ilegalja*: the Illegal, Constellation of underground militant groups fighting for Kosovo separation from Yugoslavia and unification with Albania during Tito’s Yugoslavia.

affidavits from the local communities were required, I mean, it was difficult for those of us who were “stained,” as some of them, at that time, liked to call us, it was very difficult because there was no local community, especially my local community, who would issue a kind of certification that I fulfilled the criteria to enroll, the former-Yugoslav ideological-political criteria.

And this is an issue that... a very big challenge to enroll. When I obtained the student card of the University of Pristina, to me it was like graduating, maybe when I graduated I wasn't as enthusiastic as when I received the student card of the University of Pristina.

Fehmi Hajra: When did this happen?

Myrvete Dreshaj: This happened in...1988, in the academic year 1988-'89. I was released from prison in August, 1987, one year, a specific hell in which I finished the *matura*,¹¹ because nobody accepted us, there was absolutely no school that would accept us to finish the fourth year. Wherever we went, they would say that we were irredentists, nationalists, and had no right to education because we were against the system.

What I did, while I was in prison, my father had issued an identity card that I allegedly was a resident of the municipality of Prizren and a medical certificate, of course he did that thanks to his connections, which said that I had been sick for three years and couldn't continue high school. So on September 1, 1987, I started as a regular student of the Prizren gymnasium, in the department of biology.

Back then the director of the school was a Serb, but however, I went there as a regular student for three years with the aim to finish the gymnasium and enroll in the Faculty of Medicine, because I also had all Fives¹² in high school. But three years later, I was in a class when the director of the school came holding a paper and called, “Who is Myrvete Dreshaj?” He spoke fluent Albanian. I said, “I am.” Then he added, “Starting from today, you are no longer a student of this gymnasium, you are expelled because you are a nationalist.” I returned to Peja from Prizren and continued like that for a couple of months, until the authorities of the 11 Maji gymnasium of Peja were convinced, under threats from my parents, to let us take exams by correspondence and finish the fourth year.

Fehmi Hajra: Then you got a Master's?

¹¹ *Maturë* or *Maturë e Madhe*, a set of examinations given to students after the eighth year of elementary school (High school graduation).

¹² Grade A on an A-F scale (Five-0)

Myrvete Dreshaj: Yes, I came to the University of Pristina and in fact I was recognized as a regular student only when Serbs officially closed down the University of Pristina for Albanian students and we moved to the university held in houses.¹³

Here I finished the Faculty of Philology, the Department of Albanian Language and Literature, in the regular term, I graduated in 1993. Then I enrolled in the third stage studies right away in 1994, again in the Albanian Language and Literature Department. I finished the third stage studies, I got the Master's degree and now I am close to defending my Ph.D. thesis.

Fehmi Hajra: You were employed for how long?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Employed? Meaning when?

Fehmi Hajra: In the period we are talking about.

Myrvete Dreshaj: No. I only worked for two years after graduating in the village of Bardh i Madh, the municipality of Fushë Kosova, then I was selected as an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education for the group of subjects dealing with Albanian Literature and Language, I worked there for around six years. This is the third year that I am a lecturer of the History of Albanian Literature in the Faculty of Education of the University of Pristina.

Fehmi Hajra: Can you please tell us when you engaged in politics for the first time and what were the circumstances?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Look, first let's define what politics is and let's consider the age we were at the time when we tried to do politics. I also said it in the beginning, when I brought up the dilemma of what is an activity that can first be called national and then political. Maybe those are notions that only when one creates a more complete personality...

But the first steps of each individual in the national movement, let's conditionally say the national movement, I guess start when one starts doing something more than the others, and that action differs from the spontaneous reactions of other parts of the society. That's why I tried to explain in the beginning, the moment when my mother kept the illegal books in her trunk, I mean books that were strictly forbidden, and which you would be punished for if they were found in an Albanian family living in Kosovo, I can find my first steps there. Then the circle of friends in the gymnasium, of course, had its

¹³ By 1991, after Slobodan Milošević's legislation making Serbian the official language of Kosovo and the removal of all Albanians from public service, Albanians were excluded from schools as well. The reaction of Albanians was to create a parallel system of education hosted mostly by private homes.

own role. The discussion over national topics, that was the crucial step that made me engage in an activity and give my part in the Albanian movement for liberation.

Fehmi Hajra: Were these discussions organized or...?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Of course in the beginning they were only organized at the level of discussions between friends. Then, when the first cells were created, and then we created the illegal group, I mean, we slowly widened until we established the organization, we called it the patriotic organization *Ideali* [The Ideal], I mean, a youth organization of gymnasium students of the high school in Peja.

Fehmi Hajra: Who participated mainly?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Mainly, we participated...when we were sentenced, it was called “the girls group” because we were seven girls and two boys. Hava Shala, a friend of mine, was the leader of the group as well as Robert Rasaj, I mean these two were leaders of the groups, the others were members, Zyrafete Muriqi, Hydajete Kelmendi, Zoge Shala and I...and many other names...

Fehmi Hajra: What was the aim of this organization?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Just like *Rilindja Kombëtare*, that raised the national awareness among Albanians, of course 1981 got us more aware, and I think that the whole accumulation of the Albanian struggles after the Second World War seemed to explode and reflect in this year, reflecting this way in almost every Albanian family.

The creation of illegal groups was very present in that period, there was our concrete activity of issuing various magazines, publications, distributing various tracts and so on. We couldn't get beyond the rules which we illegally read about, and heard about or heard from each-other about.

It is known that in '81 and after UDB¹⁴ and the Yugoslav State Security aimed to give political classes in every school, gymnasium, and I myself faced these political lectures, which were given by the security inspectors in classrooms, when they would ask, “Does anyone oppose this?” And I know that I wasn't the quiet student who lowered her head and said, “Ok! [in English] This is alright!” But I asked various questions, like: “Why do we need to protest? Why aren't our demands fulfilled? Why don't we have the right to use the flag, we fought the National Liberation War with another nation?” And so on.

¹⁴ UDB, *Uprava državne bezbednosti* (State Security Administration), with the additional “a” for *armije*, Yugoslav army.

And I know that I became part of UDB's evidence since then, in 1981 and '82, when I was still a student of the first and second year of gymnasium, of course because of the questions that I asked. Then there were education curriculums that would be reduced, and the [Albanian] Literature professor had no right to teach us about Kadare, Dritëro Agolli and not even Migjen, not to talk about others, because of course I was a good student who knew this subject and I always asked questions about it from the security agents. It is known that we didn't receive any answer to our questions, but however, I asked.

Fehmi Hajra: I am interested in knowing what was your motivation for these activities at this young age.

Myrvete Dreshaj: We saw that we weren't equal, I mean, we had already reached an age of maturity where we were able to realize that we were not equal to other nations in former Yugoslavia and that we were treated as second or third rate citizens. We saw that we had no right of employment the way others did, we saw that our economic situation was very different from the one of our neighbors who were Serbs and from other nationalities. I mean, there were all these concrete things of our everyday lives which we saw with our own eyes and based on which we could realize how much we differed from the others.

Fehmi Hajra: Was there any event during your childhood or youth that was directly connected to your family and that affected your activity in politics?

Myrvete Dreshaj: I mentioned a little earlier that my childhood was connected to my growing up and its consequences. I always missed my father and of course I often asked, "Why can't I have my father at home like all the other children, why does he have to be an immigrant whom I can only see once or twice a week, and so on?"

In Albanian traditional families it was difficult not to have both parents at home all the time and you always had the feeling that a part of you was missing, while I noticed that the parents of my friends were in a much more difficult situation, while we at least were in a better financial situation, the fact that I spiritually missed my father was another thing.

I had my friends who had to walk 18 kilometers to the gymnasium of Peja, and who were kept alive by the will to go to school. There were other Serbian *rreth* and villages that had the school bus, while my best friend who lived in Lugu i Baranit had to walk in snow and rain, and during our break, when we met, we would ask ourselves, "Why is this discrimination needed, the ones who come from a Serbian village is a student just like the other ones, why do they have to be more privileged and the others more discriminated?"

We also had other reasons that pushed us to be determined in our stands and inspired us. We always had the aim to do something on November 28,¹⁵ a party, an artistic program, a cultural program or simply prepare a recital. Even though it was a forbidden holiday by the state, we gathered and did the ceremony for this certain date and for others alike.

A very crucial moment was one event, when it was the anniversary of our gymnasium and they told us that the best students of the gymnasium would be selected to prepare a cultural-artistic program, because that anniversary would be the day when the gymnasiums of the region would meet and they told us, from the director's office, that one of the Albanian gymnasiums was included. Maybe it was a provocation, strangely, and with full enthusiasm it took us one month to prepare a very good program, but in the last day, at the general rehearsal where the whole school principals were, they told us that the program couldn't be delivered because it had too much nationalism, irredentism, chauvinism and all those terms that were discriminating at the time, and I know that this was another crucial step that made us show openly, write and distribute tracts, proclamations, banners in the Peja gymnasium, in the streets, in the middle of the city and in the region.

We even stuck a tract on the director's office door, we stuck tracks on the office doors of other people from the school leadership, we distributed them in corridors, students decks, I mean, we expressed our revolt in the harshest way that we thought was possible for the time.

Fehmi Hajra: You mentioned the national or patriotic movement that was called *Ideali* in Peja. Can you tell us more about it? Who organized it? What was its effect on how other activities and events?

Myrvete Dreshaj: We got to hear, I mean read later as well, about how the illegal groups in Kosovo were organized and often they simply were cells of each other. Especially now there are two published pieces by mister Ethem Çeku, *Mendimi Politik Rreth Lëvizjes Ilegale në Kosovë* [The Political Thought of the Illegal Movement in Kosovo] and *Shekulli i Ilegales* [A Century of Illegality], I mean big organizations such as LPK [*Lëvizja Patriotike Kombëtare*/National Patriotic Movement] or LKÇK [*Lëvizja Kombëtare për Çlirimin e Kosovës*/National Movement for the Liberation of Kosovo] had their cells, a part of them were imprisoned, while the other part continued the activity, I mean, a new core was created by the old one.

To be honest, now when we talk with our friends, they are all surprised of how we managed without having such connections, without being a core of any of the big organizations, we managed to organize and take action, how we managed and how we knew, but we were inspired from what we were seeing during the trials of the patriots who were active in the Movement, because of their proud and brave stand. Those trials were very frequent after '81, we were inspired and self organized. We

¹⁵ Albanian Flag Day.

didn't have any connection with those organizations because we didn't personally know any of their members, but in the same spirit as theirs, we organized our patriotic organization *Ideali*.

Only later did we realize that the term organization is something much bigger, even though when we founded it, we aimed to make it very big. This was an illegal group, I mean organized in the same spirit as the other groups of the time, which dealt with writing banners, propaganda, distribution of literature, writing and distribution of the pamphlets and so on.

I was in charge of providing illegal literature. My father brought that literature secretly hidden in the car's engine when he came on vacations from Germany. I unfolded it, I mean, it was always very well covered in order not to damage it, and I read it, then I distributed it to the friends from the group as well as to other people, who then distributed it hand-to-hand. In the spirit of that literature and based on what was shown in the material we distributed, slowly after the arrest, this activity became an everyday activity of ours. There was no month that the morning didn't find tracts in Peja, tracts that spoke about the real situation of Albanians in the former Yugoslavia and their vital demands.

Fehmi Hajra: What was the place, location?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Peja.

Fehmi Hajra: Do you consider that any action happened to you as a result of this situation? If yes, what was it?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Look now, everything has its connection to something, maybe...something that is detached from other things can hardly be rooted, but...let's count some of the effects, if I can emphasize the main ones: first, we were simply a group of high schoolers, to be honest, we were the best students of the gymnasium. So, we all were excellent students and it was a big deal for a gymnasium that had a tradition of teaching, to imprison its own students and sentence them to many years in prison.

To be honest, there was another group of students sentenced in Peja before us, but I know one thing that during our trial, for three days in a row, Peja was in such a situation that everyone was thinking about us, maybe not for the fact that we were being sentenced as a group of "nationalists," but because a group which was mostly formed by girls was being sentenced, this was an unique case which will be remembered in the history of the punishments of these patriotic organizations. Another characteristic that can be mentioned is how we stood and how we managed to hold ourselves during the investigation and the stand we took during the trial sessions.

Maybe they would release us if we said that we regretted everything we did, that we weren't aware of the impact our actions would have, that they were wrong and so on, but our stand was strict: that our demands were right, they were historical demands of our nation to exercise its right to live just like the others, and time proved that those demands were really right, all the struggle. In the end aren't we living the outcome of the dreams of that youth that besides everything else, defended Kosovo in Serbian trial sessions and prisons?

Fehmi Hajra: You have mentioned that you were sentenced to five years in 1984. Can you tell us more about that? Where were you imprisoned? What impact did it have on you?

Myrvete Dreshaj: I mentioned it earlier that in the last month before being imprisoned, we were intensively active, we had had great courage, we were very confident, we were pretty well settled, we put money together and also bought a typewriter, learned how to use it, bought the materials, then we managed to photocopy the tracts and somehow all of these events mobilized us even more, the idea that we could do many things just like the other illegal organizations that were active in Kosovo moved us more.

So, we intensively started writing and distributing tracts. Those tracts had the same content just as the tracts of other illegal organizations that were active in Kosovo. The intensity of the work increased so much, that of course we who were already registered by the state security, were arrested and imprisoned, some of us during classes and some of us at home. State security arrested many other students as well, I mean not only the nine of us, for whom later they created a collective verdict, but many other students of the gymnasiums were arrested, and I still admire myself for managing to defend their actions as well, I mean the three of us, we took over their actions as well. Because we created the illegal group with nine people, each one of us had its cell, I mean each had three other members with whom they organized and took action, and I feel good that none of our cells of three were held in prison, I mean, we took over all the responsibility and the others were released after two or three hours of investigations or one or two days of investigations, I mean they were released.

In the beginning I was held in the prison in Mitrovica, I mean, the investigation was done in Mitrovica for almost one full year. Seven or eight months after, we had the trial, a very painful coincidence happened that day, and I am surprised not to be crying today for that, my eyes were full of tears once when I talked about it, but today...the day when our generation was celebrating the *matura* was the day when we were being sentenced. I mean this was...we received this information somehow while inside the prison and all we had was a plastic glass filled with water, and we congratulated each other and our generation by knocking on each other's walls, with the signals we used to communicate inside the prison.

First, we were sentenced to more years, I was sentenced to five years, but then the Court of Third Instance lowered our punishment. My friend was sentenced to seven years while Robert Rasaj, the leader of the group was sentenced to seven years. Then the Court of Third Instance lowered their punishments as well. After the verdict, the other part of the sentence, I mean the other period, after some time, was in the prison of Lipjan, I mean, I was in the prison of Lipjan until I was released.

Fehmi Hajra: Can you tell us something about prison?

Myrvete Dreshaj: One has their own lives in prison as well. The political prisoners in the prisons of former Yugoslavia were distinct from the others. I mean, you thought of a dignified stand in prison as a continuity of your national activity, I mean, you had to be relentless, tough and have a dignified stand. These were the aims you had to fulfill and had to be held by every political prisoner. I feel good for my generation and the friends of my group who had a very dignified stand with which they let the state security and other members of the Yugoslav ruling power know that they were really aware of the weight that their actions carried and that they were unbreakable on the path they had chosen, I mean, they had a great stand as it is expected from a person who has to hold the path on which they started.

Fehmi Hajra: Then you were a member of the *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës*¹⁶ in 1990...?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Yes...I want to talk about the time in prison, the time when I was released and the challenges to finish high school, I told you earlier that it was a special challenge. Almost all of the individuals imprisoned from our group were released and we all aimed to continue our studies. But it was very difficult to finish high school, they would still bring us to trials. Once, in Pristina, in Pristina they would say that it is a concern of the municipal court, the municipal court was in Peja, while the director of the gymnasium now was an Albanian, unfortunately he was not a Serb anymore as when we were imprisoned, and he wouldn't allow us to take the exams.

Later I found a connection and enrolled in the gymnasium of Prizren, but all this only lasted for three weeks. They expelled me from this gymnasium as well because I was politically unfit. I returned to Peja again. The same challenges began. My father who was a great education enthusiast, as I told you earlier, already lost his patience, he also used the method of threatenings the state security as well as the school director, at that point he was prepared to even use force and he said that to both parties, that he was ready to go until the end in order to make those children finish high school.

¹⁶ *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.

During the trial our parents, who were in court, demanded to know whether we would lose the right to education or not, we were very young at that time and the court told us that we would have the right to education as soon as we were released, but later it turned out that all those tortures done to us were an issue of the school director's personal fear. Everything was special for us in the organization of the exams. A person from the secretariat assisted the professor during our exam. I mean, we succeeded there as well, I know that I managed to get all Fives, but got a Three in Chemistry maybe more because my professor's brother was a political prisoner too and he was aware that he was being supervised, so maybe he lacked the courage to give me a higher grade, and I got a Three in Serbian as well.

Then, continuing at the University, of course once we came to Pristina we met other people from the Illegal movement as well, who had spent many years of prison. We are talking about 1980 and 1990, which was the time when the political prisoners were being released from the Yugoslav prison, sentences were shortened, Article 133 [of the penal code], which was about political propaganda fell together with the fall of some communist systems in Eastern Europe, while the generation of prisoners of '81 was close to the tenth anniversary of their time in political prison. I mean, a big part of the political prisoners was released and in fact Pristina gathered these people again. We met some of them, some of them we met for the first time, about some of them we had read, so the cells of the organization began again, even though now in different ways.

Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës [LDK] was established in '89. Joining this party had its own risks, joining and registering as a member of a party was not easy, especially when you had years of prison in your personal biography. In the meantime, this party held itself [as a model] of national purity, it claimed to become the synonym of a nationwide Movement and so on. And we, with our enthusiasm would knock every door of the student dormitory in order to recruits members and send them to the Writers Association, which was the headquarter of LDK.

Later, through assemblies, starting from the headquarter to the other branches, the branches and the general assembly decided to rank me in this party and elect me as a member of the General Council. So, I held this position for six years in a row. During this time I was mainly in charge of things in the field and not work in the center, [I was in charge] of the organization, the registration of the population, the organization of the elections, visiting specific families with various needs, distributing humanitarian aid. So, I was in charge of everything that was this party's external and organizational part of the work in the field. I stayed in *LDK* until before the Third Assembly, I mean, until 1996.

Fehmi Hajra: Can you tell us something about its goals when you joined it?

Myrvete Dreshaj: To me, the concept about this party was very general. Not its ideals, but the way it functioned made it possible to develop a general movement of Kosovo idealists within this party. This is how I thought about it until the time I decided to leave this party. To me, this party was a movement which in the most legal way built the national concept for the liberation of Kosovo. This was my concept of accepting this party and there wasn't much difference between my illegal activity and the activity while a member of *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës*.

I have a short flash [of memory] here, when I came to studying again and my studies were interrupted once again, it was 1989/90, the year of great demonstrations, a year that is followed by the closing of the Institutions of Kosovo, the University, the [public] television and so on. It is known that this was the year of very bloody demonstrations in Kosovo, I mean, '81 repeats again. It is known that we were at the front of the demonstrations as well. From the demonstration after which I was imprisoned, we thought that the first two rows of students, when we went out of the Students Center, should be women, with the hope that the police would not intervene very harshly and we could manage to go to the city center, where other people would join us as well.

Also because we thought that the police wouldn't intervene once they saw the two rows of women, of course I was in the first row together with my friends. The police closed the entrance that led to the city center from the Institute of Albanology. We walked towards the former Post Office, No. 6. We made half the road. Then there was a very harsh intervention and to be honest, even a bloody one from the police. Then we withdrew, the identification, the arrests from the dormitory, the investigation here in Pristina, then after three days of staying in the offices of the Police Security of Pristina, we were transferred to Mitrovica, but the great luck, the greatest luck from the experience I had, I managed to defend myself by declaring that I was alone in the demonstration, because their aim was to create an illegal group again, to punish us as a group.

I saw myself that I was prepared enough, so I managed to say that I didn't know my friends who were arrested together with me, not to denounce them, so they were released some five or six hours later, and some others one or two days later, and in the end they raised an indictment only for me, according to which I was held in prison from October 30, 1980 until January 3, 1990. More than anything else, what is stuck in my memory is the participation of the University professors in our arrest during the identification and the arrests at the Students Center.

Fehmi Hajra: And then you stayed in LDK until 1996?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Yes, until 1996.

Fehmi Hajra: And that is where you gave an end to...?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Yes, I had given an end to the [activity in] political parties one year earlier already. Look, after getting out of prison, I mean, the second prison, which lasted sixty-three or four days, I immediately started looking for my friends, joined them in the demonstration in order to continue again, so even during January and February, these demonstrations were very bloody, especially in the region I come from, Peja.

Many were killed and injured, I mean, the demonstrations were very intensive as well as the resistance of Albanians, the participation and duration [of the protests] in this city and all around Kosovo was special. And one crucial thing for further activity was [what happened] after the end of these demonstrations and really after the horror and terror that these demonstrations planted. I know that in February, 1990, after the shutdown of the public television and the University as well as most of the high schools and with the chasing of the students from the buildings, with the firing of almost all Albanian employees, with the signatures that you had to give in order to tell whether you were pro or against Serbia, all these historical situations in which Kosovo found itself in '90, aimed to put fear in the hearts of Albanians.

And almost for the first time since I remember, Albanians somehow started being afraid of such a big terror and this for us was the most elusive and sensitive thing, is it possible for a nation to be afraid to the bones because of the terror that was perpetrated? We know the dum dum bullets that remained in the corpses of many demonstrators, then the situation where two or three people weren't allowed to walk together in the streets, so people started not going out at all, they started to stay home.

Now you know what it means, no salary, no work, isolated at home, a real collapse of Albanians in former Yugoslavia. At the same time Serbia continued the propaganda against the Albanians as unreliable people for the state and wild in behaviour and actions. In a newspaper, it was a piece of information from TANJUNG, with my friend Hava we read that the killings that were done in the demonstrations weren't committed by the police and Serbian army. On the contrary, Albanians were using the demonstrations as an arena to shoot in an uncontrolled way and take revenge because of blood feuds.

This was terrible to us, it was even shocking in a way, how is all this terror they are making on us possible? And now they interpret it as if we are doing it to ourselves, as protests and demonstrations are the arena where Albanians are taking revenge for the feuds they have with each other. And this affected the feeling, this reopened a discussion we had had in prison some years earlier about whether we could do something or not about blood feuds reconciliation, because we already knew that feuds were a phenomena in Kosovo, and now we were more determined because we had a better

situation: the demonstrations had not only advanced nationwide demands to higher levels, but they also made a big change in the souls of our people.

A change that would usually take a decade to happen, did so within one day only. The power of bloodshed in those days was magical. This was the power that made the people in enmities participate in the same funeral, such as the funeral of Fatmir Uka, Gani Daci and other national heroes from Peja and its region, without past hatreds. This was the power that made a woman accepted in the men's *oda*¹⁷ without being mocked but on the contrary, made her word be heard there. This made us, a group of youth, confront directly the perpetrators behind bars and in the Serbian and Yugoslavian cells, confront the suffering of their families, with the ongoing anxiety of risking the continuation of the feuds, and produce the genesis of the idea of blood feuds reconciliations.

Either way, any other activity was impossible at the time, it was impossible to continue the demonstrations that were done with rocks and that had bullets and tanks in front of them. At that time this group that was already established, my friend Hava and I went to the *oda* of Adem Grabovci and talked to the others as well, Brahim Dreshaj, Lulëzim Ethemaj and Ethem Çeku, about whether there was something we could do to at least tell Serbia and Yugoslavia that Albanians at times of war have always ended the activity of feuds and this is historically known, for example from the *Kanun*¹⁸ of Lekë Dukagjini we know that Albanians gave the *besa*¹⁹ in specific situations, they forgave bloods, stopped the activity and then later they continued their ordinary life.

Fehmi Hajra: Let's talk a little about the Initiative for Blood Feuds Reconciliations.²⁰ You were among the initiators. What was the main aim of this organization, its goals, motivation?

Myrvete Dreshaj: I mentioned it earlier as well that in the *oda* of Adem Grabovci we didn't talk about reconciliation as a thought anymore, but more as a decision that is worth and needs to be taken to reconcile blood feuds among the people of our nation. This is related to the early 1990, the roots for this action to begin were all those reprisals that were done by Serbia, the submissive position we accepted as Albanians, the fear that they instilled, so we thought to bring the brave soul of Albanians

¹⁷ Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.

¹⁸ *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.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ In 1991 a mass movement for the forgiveness of blood feuds (*pajtimi i gjakut*), was launched among the Albanian population of Kosovo. It was initiated by a group of students, former political prisoners, who approached folklore scholar Anton Çetta and others seniors figures in academia to lead the process. The movement reconciled thousands of cases, and it became a movement for national unity.

to life again, to bring bravery until sacrifice to life again, we were great idealists and we first would challenge ourselves.

The wounds that were caused to us by others seemed easier [to heal] than the wounds that we were causing to ourselves. This is where we created the first core of the Action for Blood Feuds Reconciliation, where it was decided that forgiveness must be demanded in the name of national heroes, of their bloods, in the name of the nation, of the flag, of youth, of national unity. The permanent motto of the action would be: when others kill us, let us not open wounds to ourselves. Let's bring the 32 victims of the Serbian terror to life again by reconciling 32 bloods, by stopping 32 new wounds from being opened; go to the field and collect remarks and complete data about families in enmities, misunderstandings or wounds; use the visits during mournings that were held for national heroes to promote the Movement for Blood Feuds Reconciliations; during the conversation with the forgivers not ask much about the circumstances of the murder because no matter what they were, the families had lost their loved one, their son, father, uncle, brother, sister or mother; emphasize that they can serve Kosovo and the nation even through the dead; expand the Action for Blood Feuds Reconciliations, after the first result, to all the enslaved Albanian lands. It was also decided to talk and seek for help from others as well.

The first kernel of this Action was made of the former political prisoners, then we asked LDK to at least formally take over this initiative, because as former prisoners we could be prosecuted and arrested and this way the action would be interrupted without even starting. The person in charge for LDK in Peja valued the Action but didn't accept the mission.

After that we started going to families, first in our *lagje*,²¹ the surrounding villages and the city in order to identify all the families that were in enmity with each other, and then we created a register, that is, when we thought that we could go to those families and reconcile them with each other, make them forgive the blood to each other, forgive the misunderstandings as well as wounds. We started, but we were really young, from the age of 20 to 25-26, and the rules of *oda* as we found later were a school in itself and we saw that no matter how enthusiastic and ready to sacrifice, we needed an *oda pleqnar*.²²

Back then there was the Council for the Defence of Human Rights and Freedom, which conducted an intensive activity and was legitimated as a movement that defended the Albanian nation in Kosovo, and Zekerija Cana²³ was the leader and secretary of the Council. We thought of going and taking with us Zekerija Cana who seemed so brave, very knowledgeable, very supportive to this activity of ours. We

²¹ *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.

²² *Pleqnarë* has the same roots as *pleq*, elderly, traditionally the mediators in a blood feud reconciliation

²³ Zekerija Cana (1934-2009), historian.

came to Pristina and found the Council, we also found professor Cana and we explained the thing to him, he was enthusiastic together with us, we weren't unknown names to him.

He said, "Yes," immediately, but he also said that, "I am afraid that I don't know the rules of *oda* that well either, but I have a friend who I think will support us and who is a person who knows folk tradition and culture very well, and this is Professor Anton Çetta."²⁴ We came to the Institute of Albanology together with professor Zekeria Cana, we told professor Anton about the initiative, so he was amazed by the idea and said, "Oh my God, is it possible that you can do this!" "Yes, we can," we said, "We gathered the evidence and many other things, but we need a *pleqnar*, someone who knows the customs, the traditions of *oda*."

Eh, Anton Çetta was a good collector and scholar of folklore, he knew every *oda* of Dukagjin as well as the Kosovo Plain, he said that he would join us. For the first case we went to the village of Lumbardh, where together with professor Anton Çetta and Zekeria Cana there were 21 youth, all of them former political prisoners. And on February 2, 1990, we managed to obtain a three month *besa* from the leader of the family Isa Leka. This date to us marks the official beginning of the Action for Blood Feuds Reconciliation. This family was in feud with the family of Smajl Leka, whom we had met in the January demonstrations in Peja.

After the police had dispersed the demonstrators, we entered a coffee shop where Smajl Leka was holding his head with his hands on the table. My friend Hava approached him and asked what was the matter, whether his son had been injured in the demonstration. "No," he said, "My sons are locked at home because we are in feud with someone, but I am afraid they escaped and came here, and I hope God doesn't allow Leka to go out and embarrass us by pleasing the enemy."

That day we stayed in that *oda* almost all day. Isa was speechless for many hours. He only moved his head but didn't answer. The law of the feud weighed more than our argument. Those days his son was beaten by the police very badly...this is where our pain met his. This is where his heart weakened and the law of feud cracked, the law that had made his life harsh...

Fehmi Hajra: So, you invited professor Çetta?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Yes, we invited professor Çetta. Professor Anton was with us every Saturday and Sunday, on weekends, while for the other five days we worked by ourselves, the group that initiated [the action], we prepared the cases, while during those two days of the weeks, together with the professors, we concluded them in a solemn way.

²⁴ Anton Çetta (1920-1995), folklore scholar, and leader of the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds Movement.

Fehmi Hajra: The Council was legal, did you have connections with them?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Yes, the Council for the Defence of Human Rights and Freedoms was legal, it is a known fact. But we were another group, the group of the Initiative for the Action for Blood Feuds Reconciliation. We hadn't registered it, we didn't do anything that would leave distinguishing marks, the structure of the organization was just like the one of the illegal groups. First professor Zekeria Cana was the only one who supported us as an individual who worked in the Council for the Defence of Human Rights and Freedoms. But then we sought more institutional support from the branches of *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës*, in the beginning they hesitated a lot, maybe a little from fear and a little from lack of confidence...

But we continued working. The reconciliation of the Boçolli families in the village of Raushiq was done, the blood was forgiven in Broliq... We saw the people who just some minutes earlier considered themselves enemy hugging each other. Every forgiven blood was a contribution to our movement for the reconciliation of every feud. The reconciliations were done at no conditions. The blood was forgiven out of bravery. Martyred Kosovo was the guarantor, the blood that was shed for freedom, the flag, the youth and the nation. The families that were in feuds reconciled because they believed in their nation, they believed in professor Anton, they believed in the honesty and purity of the youth. Soon the Action went beyond the local and took the shape of a nationwide Movement, famous intellectuals started joining it very quickly.

Fehmi Hajra: Do you mean it had its echo, its results?

Myrvete Dreshaj: It had a big echo. I said that from January-February, when you could see no people walking in groups of three in the cities of Kosovo and in the city of Peja, on May 1, 1990 we managed to gather 500 thousand people at Verrat e Llukës and that was a big victory, I mean the fear vanished, the people took back their courage, a homogeneity and unity was created among each other. And I want to say one thing, that all of those who participated in the great gathering of blood feuds reconciliations at Verrat e Llukës know that we were surrounded by tanks, but nobody thought about it or whether they could get out of that gathering alive, I mean this action planted courage until sacrifice into people and I think that the greatest activity of this movement was that it instilled courage and bravery into Albanians once again, and maybe they were able to enter the war being more homogenous than in 1998, 1998, when the war of the *Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës* [Kosovo Liberation Army] took place.

Fehmi Hajra: I am interested in your motivation for blood feuds reconciliation.

Myrvete Dreshaj: I think that it was a very good recall of history. In the illegal movement, first we read about our national history, from which we found out who we are, where we are, where we come from, what nation we are, I mean, we were well equipped with information as far as history and our genesis as a nation goes, and we knew the *Kanun* of Lekë Dukagjini very well too.

We didn't select Verrat e Llukës by accident, it was exactly there where an Albanian covenant took place in 1903, that was the time when they were at war with Montenegrins. We chose that place, because we knew its history. Among Albanians, history usually repeats itself from one decade to the other and maybe it was according to this logics that we attempted to repeat history. It was humanism as well, that connects people to each other, you relieve families, you relieve children and so on. I mean, we had cases of murders just like everywhere else and at the time we pretended that justice would deal with them, but we knew how the courts were, not completely and not fully ours, then [we knew that] they could deal with one, two or three members, but not with the whole family, and it is known that our families were very big. And the release of the families was our goal.

Fehmi Hajra: Do you think that any other action happened to you as a result to this event?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Look, during the Action for Blood Feuds Reconciliation at the same time we carried out the Action *Familja Ndihton Familjen* [Family Helps Family] which is related to the Trepça and Stari Trg [sic]²⁵ miners. We went there for reconciliations and we saw the poor situation of the miners, their financial situation was terrible and then we thought of the idea of starting something else and with the end of reconciliations we continued the action *Familja Ndihton Familjen*, whose aim was that the families from the Dukagjin Plain with a better financial situation be connected and become friends with the families of the miners of Stari Trg and help them.

For months in a row we were active in this Action and connected many families and I feel very good because they are still friends and save that connection as sacred. I mean, we created some bridges that connected the families of miners who during the hardest time for them were helped financially, economically and morally, not to give up, at the time when they even lacked food.

Fehmi Hajra: Who organized them?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Mostly the same people who were part of the Movement for Blood Feuds Reconciliation, those 21 I mentioned, first the group of six-seven people then of 20, then the Councils of Reconciliations that we had created, we went to Mitrovica, Prizren, Gjiilan in groups of two or three people from the original group and created the cell, the circle. The greatest work that we did was that

²⁵ The speaker is here referring to Stari Trg.

we also included Presheva, Bujanoc, Tetovo, Gostivar, Plava, Gucia, all the Albanian lands, generally, in both Actions.

Fehmi Hajra: When did the action *Familja Ndihton Familjen* take place?

Myrvete Dreshaj: It took place in the late 1991 and continued during the whole 1992 until 1993.

Fehmi Hajra: You included the whole Kosovo?

Myrvete Dreshaj: The *Familja Ndihton Familjen* was mainly extended in the Dukagjin Plain, but also beyond, while the Action for Blood Feuds Reconciliation was extended in every Albanian land in the former Yugoslavia.

Fehmi Hajra: Did it have any result?

Myrvete Dreshaj: It had its results and I said even above that I am very happy about that result and the contacts with those families. I know that here it is a tradition that one part of our village people go to the mountains for three months during the summer and I saw many children of miners that those families took with their own children and hosted for three months in their mountain houses during the summer, as long as they stayed there themselves. It was a great action, keeping those pale children of the Trepça miners there.

Fehmi Hajra: We will talk about your activity in the *Shoqata e të Burgosurve Politikë* [The Association of Political Prisoners]. Can you tell us more?

Myrvete Dreshaj: After getting out of LDK, I joined the *Shoqata e të Burgosurve Politikë* and in the assembly of the association I was elected in its leadership. I cannot say that we conducted big activities for the time but we met at least every second week, we talked about the political situation in Kosovo, we took notes, we had a very good register of all the former political prisoners and those who were still suffering as political prisoners, we tried to help families whose members were still suffering in prison.

But I know that actually we followed the situation in Kosovo, the beginning of the cells [engaged in] war in Kosovo. Then from this association Ramë Buja, Gani Koci, Hydajet Hyseni, Ilmi Ramadani, Selatin Novosella, Berat Luzha and some others went to the war front. I mean, we were loyal followers of the events in Kosovo, if nothing at all at least we attempted to create a right opinion, and as realist as possible, of the events and the situation in Kosovo.

Fehmi Hajra: What was the aim of the Association?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Not to allow that the people who suffered prison sentences, who had been held as political prisoners in former Yugoslavia, be dispersed, but allow them to have a center, an address where they could go, where they could gather and discuss about various activities and meet with each other. I remember the time of the protests of the Students Union, we talked with them in this Association, we gave them our support and courage. I was part of them together with my students. I mean all the people who came to this Association found the support, the courage and the morale to continue further with their struggle in the general fight towards the liberation of Kosovo.

Fehmi Hajra: What are the main challenges and dilemmas you faced as a politician?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Look, if we are talking about the challenges because of gender, there are moments when...

Fehmi Hajra: In general...

Myrvete Dreshaj: I started with gender and will continue. There are moments when you absolutely don't even think about your gender, but but often in the Action for Blood Feuds Reconciliation we, as women, had to confront the tradition of the oda [men's chamber]. We were hardly understood sometimes. I shared some of my memories which explain that situation in my book about blood feuds reconciliation as well.

There were cases when we entered the oda and elders would not even extend their hands to us, the meaning of it was that it was not our place, but we had to go to the women's house. Because our friends, with whom we were there, noticed it immediately, in such cases they would be the ones to open the discussion and we would continue it. It is weird, but there were many cases when the elders sat with their legs crossed in the oda, and they always found this position, with their back turned towards us, in order for us to sit behind their backs.

And then, when we talked, explained the mission, and asked for the forgiveness of blood, they would slowly start moving and in the last moment they were in front of us. This, to us as gender, was a great victory, a victory of gender, because they forgot that it was we, the women, who asked for the forgiveness of blood, and in the end, when we also asked to go together with them to the women's part of the house and ask them whether they agreed to forgive the blood, because someone could have their son or husband killed, that was very amazing to us, and it was a request they were asked for the first time in their lives and they didn't refuse it.

While when we came to the *oda* together with our friends, there were many elders who would say that first we would extend our hands to these *burrnesha*,²⁶ then to you. This was a big victory, which we started with doubts, but finished with a very great result.

Fehmi Hajra: So, you had no other dilemmas or challenges?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Yes of course every part has its own dilemma and challenges, which in this conversation of ours have been said many times.

Fehmi Hajra: We are talking about you as a politician, when you were more active in politics.

Myrvete Dreshaj: Look, the challenges part is strongly connected to the time of intense activity, when your life wasn't safe, not even for five minutes, and that was not easy. I mean, the whole part of the beginning of the Action for Blood Feuds Reconciliation was done during the curfew and we know that Kosovo had full curfews, from 6 in the evening to 6 in the morning.

But we took action at the time of the curfew, we went home to home, we took notes, we prepared the cases for reconciliation, I mean those were moments in which you didn't know whether you were going to be alive five minutes later.

But, however, we almost never faced doubts such as whether we were going to continue further or not, they rarely happened. I mean, we were really eager to do our work and we were convinced that we were doing something right, positive and very necessary for our nation. I mean we had no doubts whether to continue or not, but there were many difficulties and challenges. A part of my friends are not alive anymore. They were killed. And some of them miss some of their limbs.

Fehmi Hajra: You are still active in politics. What motivates you?

Myrvete Dreshaj: What we call nowadays politics, the participation in a political party. With the ending of the war, I first returned to my scientific activity, my professional and educational work, I resigned from politics. I said that Kosovo has many people who think about politics, they even think about it as their profession. I returned to science, I finished my Master's, I prepared my Ph. D., I worked at the university and I said that now it is much easier to do politics, it's not a matter of life or death anymore.

²⁶ The Albanian term *burrnesha* literally means men-like, but can refer to women's show of courage, wittiness, or general disregard for social roles that often limit women's participation in the public space.

I mean, you have to be smart, prepared, and feel like doing something in politics. I had this stand until 2004, before the second national elections, when I decided to return to politics again, being aware of my possibility to still give something more in the name of those ideals in which I had been engaged years ago. These four-five years after the war in Kosovo, I looked at the structure of the people engaged in politics and I told myself that I can continue more, more, and give my contribution, so I joined *Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës* [The Alliance for the Future of Kosovo], which was organizing the first elections for the deputies in the Kosovo Parliament with an open list. According to the number of votes, I was ranked the sixth in the list. I mean, the motivation was that I could do more in politics, I could give more, I have the background on which I had worked and which I could still use and can have results out of it.

Fehmi Hajra: What's your opinion on the actual role of women in politics?

Myrvete Dreshaj: Look, we cannot talk about a specific or detached role, a woman's role is the same as a man's role. I think that women are not behind men, not as far as abilities or competence, I even think that in certain moments women are more focused, caring, enduring, natural and committed.

Women should not be given any position because of their look, they should not be there as dolls, we have a 30 percent in the Parliament about which we heard many comments in many ways, I mean, because it was imposed, because the OSCE [Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe] decided so. I don't think that way. I see that for these ten months that I have been part of the Kosovo Parliament, women don't differ from men, they have the same abilities, competence, just like the others.

I mean there are no absolute differences, a woman should be elected because of her value and not of her gender, and I absolutely think that they should not be given any advantage because they belong to a certain gender, but also not be discriminated because of their gender. Women should be given advantages only according to their merit, but I think here men are greedier, when the positions are shared there is little generosity for women.

Fehmi Hajra: Do you have anything to add about anything we talked, about your whole national and political activity?

Myrvete Dreshaj: I don't know. We had a discussion, I recalled it just like I would do with one of my friends from the movement. I am sure that something has remained unsaid, but I don't remember right now.

Fehmi Hajra: Miss Myrvete Dreshaj, thank you!