



BELOW THE RADAR

*Memories of the
Second World War in Kosovo*

Seventy years ago the Second World War ended, and the struggle to control memory began. In Kosovo, different memories have claimed to be the only true memory of the war: there is the memory of the heroic anti-fascist resistance, the memory of partisans' ethnic killings, and the mythical stories of life under Italian and German occupation as either heavenly or tragic. Each of them has become, at different times, the official one, leaving the others below the radar.

With this exhibit we want to challenge the idea that there is only one truth of the history of Kosovo during Second World War, or that a unique group – whether it is Albanians or Serbs, nationalists or socialists – possesses the truth. There is no truth in homogeneous memories that are based on some abstract notion of people. Homogeneous memories are false because they are uncritical and deny uncomfortable realities, for example the war crimes committed by their own people. But they are especially false because they do not recognize the diversity that exists within any group.

This is what oral history allows us to do: to break the monopoly of truth, whether held by the state, a nation or a political group, so we can hear the stories below the radar. We introduce here short narrations about individuals who happened to be protagonists of great events. They identified with larger groups, but made individual choices when it was almost impossible to freely choose, as greater movements of people and ideas swept Kosovo. Sometimes, they found themselves pulled to opposite sides by different loyalties to ideas and places. By retelling their stories, they or their families also tell us what was imposed on them, and how to interpret both their stories and History.



Vahide Hoxha at the Regional Conference of the Anti-Fascist Youth Movement, Gjakova, November 18, 1944.

Vahide Hoxha (1926-2013) was a lifelong educator, reformer, and activist. During the Second World War, she was active in the Anti-Fascist Youth Movement, and met her future husband, partisan commander and postwar Kosovo leader Fadil Hoxha. Prior to her death, she served as chair of the Association of Veterans of the Anti-Fascist National Liberation War of Kosovo.

“The conference began, the greetings began. [...] They said, “The commander is coming!” We all raised and applauded [...] I did not see the commander. I knew that the commander was Fadil Hoxha, but I didn’t know who he was. After the greetings, he continued his way like a soldier and left. But the organizers [...] informed us that a dance would take place in the evening to entertain the delegates [...] And I went, I sat with a friend of mine from Prizren. When the music started, the commander came, he approached us, and told my friend, ‘Will you allow me to take your friend for a dance?’ [...] How did he get to me? [...] Because I greeted him at the conference, I got up there. I told him how the Anti-Fascist Women Youth in Prizren worked and congratulated the conference. That was all!”



Sadik Stavileci, hero of the nation.

Stavileci (1915-1942) was killed in Tirana by Italian troops together with Vojo Kushi and Xhorxhi Martin, all members of the Communist resistance. After the war, only Vojo Kushi was celebrated as national hero. Shkelzen Maliqi, Sadik's nephew, tells how the Stavileci created an apocryphal story to make sense of the lack of recognition of Sadik's heroism.

“According to this legend [...] the brave youth who “danced” between the enemy’s tanks had not been Vojo Kushi, but Sadik, except that Enver Hoxha and the Workers Party purposefully hid this truth. The reason for changing the story was that my uncle, as one of the leaders of the Communist Youth, had been against the choice of Enver Hoxha as the head of the Communist Party of Albania. Another reason, always according to the version that I heard from uncle Tasim and grandmother Zyhra, was that Sadik was from Kosovo, ‘In Albania there is a prejudice against Kosovars. They don’t like us.... Even the Communists, although they call themselves internationalists, have a prejudice against Kosovars, they consider them rednecks, unsophisticated.’ [...] I did not believe this apocryphal version [...] In our family we believe that Sadik was against Enver Hoxha. And this argument served me well, since childhood, to be anti-Enverist. I was convinced that uncle Sadik had known the character of Enver Hoxha well.”

Excerpt taken from Baton Haxhiu's book Shkëlzen Maliqi - Shembja e Jugosllavisë, Kosova dhe rrëfime të tjera. Prishtinë: Filozofia Urbane, 2013.



Qərim Vasolli (1912-?)

Qërim Vasolli's story, as told by his grandson Përparim Vasolli.

“Qërim was born in 1912 in Orlan, where Lake Batlava is now, except that back then there was no lake, there was good land that the Vasolli worked. In 1941, chetniks came to the area and killed Qërim's five brothers. Only he and a younger brother survived the massacre and escaped to Pristina. [...] We have nothing left of Qërim except this ID-size photo that has become my iPhone screen saver [...] For a while after his brothers' massacre Qërim visited his family in Pristina, but only at night. He never slept home. Was he hiding in the mountains? From whom? Was he fighting? [...] We know he was arrested in 1946-47 and taken to the prison of Požarevac, from which he escaped [...] Qërim was spotted again in 1948 by someone from Pristina who was Tito's soldier, deployed at the border with Italy. That was a time of great tension between Yugoslavia and Italy, and troops were on standby on both sides of the border. This soldier recognized Qërim, even though he was wearing an Italian officer uniform. He said, 'Forget it, everyone in your family has been killed, you don't have anyone left.' I want to believe that this is the reason why he never came back.”



Sylejman Beg Kryeziu with Italian officers, Gjakova, Flag
Day 1941 or 1942.





Sylejman Beg Kryeziu with Italian officers, Gjakova,
Flag Day 1941 or 1942.

Sylejman Beg Kryeziu's story, told by his granddaughter Shqipe Malushi.

“Sylejman Beg Kryeziu was the Governor of Gjakova and a parliamentarian of the Yugoslav Kingdom from 1925 to 1941 [...] From 1941 to 1943 he was only the Governor of Gjakova. [...] Although the Italian Fascists had occupied Gjakova, it was almost fashionable to consider all high-ranking officials collaborators. My grandfather was no one's agent [...] He wore the national costume, because he wanted to emphasize his national identity, while he was going along with the occupiers in order to protect his people.

In 1944, after the Italians left Gjakova [...] German Nazi agents came back to grandfather's house and Xhafer Deva asked him, ‘Tell us who is a Communist in your city. Give us all their names.’ ‘We have no Communists in this city,’ was grandfather's answer [...] ‘How can I give up their names, most of Gjakova's youth is against the occupation, but they don't even know what Communist means, to give them up would mean giving up my children,’ he said [to his wife].

Just before the new Communist government came to power, someone told the Germans that my grandfather protected Communists [...] They sent him to German camps in Austria, where he spent three years. After the war, the new Yugoslav Communist government too declared my grandfather a war criminal. He could never return to Kosovo, because he would be executed just like his two sons were. First he went to Italy, but he could not settle there, then he went to Izmir in Turkey [...] He never saw his family again.”



Emrush Myftari as a volunteer with the Republican forces
in the Spanish Civil War, 1938.

Emrush Myftari (1909-1944) was born in Peja, studied at the Korça Lyceum and attended the royal military academy in Tirana. He was killed in 1944 in Pristina by the Yugoslav secret services OZNA, because he had been suspected of being a nationalist and a spy of the British.

“My father was executed, was shot ... sometime towards the end of '44, or beginning of '45... I was about more than a year old when father died...

In 1937, the war in Spain erupted. It is then that my father, Veli Dedi, Xhemajl Kada, and Shaban Basha, go to the Spanish war as volunteers ... They were organized in the Garibaldi Battalion, whose secretary or leader was Luigi Longo ... famous writers such as Orwell were there, then Hemingway was there ... My father had leftist ideas...

When they capitulated, I mean, the Spanish War, they went to France ... [King] Zog did not accept their return to Albania, since they were communist, so then father went to Turkey, he went to Palestine, I mean, he went to these states in the East ... He then returned from Turkey and naturally, he joined the Communist Movement here in Peja ... and so he opened the first bookshop in Peja. The bookshop was called Skenderbeg Bookshop – Brothers Myftari ...

The excuse for execution was that he was a member of the Intelligence Service, since he knew English, plus he had an English friend, a certain Flavia Kingston. So they confiscated father's wealth.”



Bedri Pejani with his family in Peja. Date unknown.

Bedri Pejani (1885-1946) was born Bedri Thaçi, but took the name of his city as it was customary at the time. He was a prominent member of the Albanian national movement under Ottoman rule. He was present at the signing of the Albanian Declaration of Independence in 1912. At the Conference of Versailles, in 1919, he represented Kosovo. Bedri Pejani was one of founders of the Kosovo Committee, and led the People's Party of Albania, formed by Fan Noli.

While in exile, after being condemned to death by Albanian leader Ahmet Zogu in 1924, he became the leader of the Committee for the National Defense of Kosovo, with the political and financial support of the Communist International (Comintern). Under the Italian Fascist occupation of Albania, he was arrested as a bolshevik and detained until Italy's capitulation in 1943. When the Germans took over, Pejani founded the Second League of Prizren with Xhafer Deva and the support of the occupiers. The Second League of Prizren presided over a wave of violent expulsions of the Serbian and Montenegrin settlers who had been given land after the First World War. Pejani was arrested in 1946 by partisans. Soon after, he was allegedly poisoned in the hospital, where he was held for health reasons.



Abdullah Zajmi with his class, 1943-44, Novi Pazar.

Abdullah Zajmi (1922-2001) was a teacher, a translator and author of textbooks. Below, an excerpt from his memoir:

“On October 27, 1942, the Ministry of Education of Albania [...] appointed me teacher in Suhi Doll. I did not know where Suhi Doll was, but fortunately, while studying pedagogy, I had a close friend from Rozhaje, we called him Shuqo ‘the Bosniak.’ With him, we went to Peja and the next day I walked to Rozhaje. I arrived at his house at night. After two days, with a friend I walked to Tuti, to Shemsedin Hadri’s, who was the secretary of the sub-prefect’s office, while the head was Nexhat Begolli. After some days, a man from the Municipality of Suhi Doll arrived and we went to Suhi Doll on horse. It is impossible to describe the experience of my meeting with the locals. They were all Albanians.

They took me to the building that served as a school [...] The students were waiting for me, (20-30 boys), dressed in national costumes [...] they spoke Albanian well. After some time, the secretary of the municipality came, he was the municipality’s only employee. He too, like most of the adult men there, carried a weapon. In that territory there were often bloody fights between partisans and chetniks, between partisans and Italian occupiers, between Albanians (Bosniaks-Muslims) and chetniks, that’s why everyone was armed and ready to defend himself.”



Exhibition

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