

INTERVIEW WITH FATHER LUSH GJERGJI

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Duration: 132 minutes

Present:

1. Father Lush Gjergji (Speaker)
2. Lura Limani (Interviewer)
3. Kaltrina Krasniqi (Camera)
4. Donjeta Berisha (Camera)

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

Lura Limani: Can you first tell us ... introduce yourself, tell us where and when you were born, and also tell us a little of the background of your family.

Father Lush Gjergj: I am Father Lush Gjergj, I was born on 21 March, year 1949 in Stubëll të Epërme [Upper Stubla], in the municipality of Viti, it is part of Karadak, or our Anamorava, as it is called now. I am the fourth child, we are four brothers. We are all alive, fortunately. I completed four years of elementary school in my birthplace, and after my birthplace I began school a long time ago, I was five--and-something-years old, with my friends. So, registration to first grade happened in the last day of the school year, when the inspector arrived. And at that time, the inspector was like some extraterrestrial! We prepared for what he will be like, who will it be.

And I was in the first desk, because I was the smallest in height, and the inspector suddenly said to me, "You, go to the blackboard. Do you know how to read and write?" I said, "Yes, I know everything we have been taught." And then he began to test me, and said, "Have you learned by heart, maybe this and that?" At the end, the teacher intervened and said, "Comrade inspector, this one is not registered." "Why?" He said, "Because he is not the right age, but he is the best in the class." And then, with my happiness and delight, the inspector said to my teacher in front of all the students, "Register him today and have him pass the first year with excellent grades. And even with a present." The present was a sort of film that moved the still images slowly-slowly, and a book, which was as if the world had been given to me.

I remember that I went home and showed it to my late mother, Dile Gjergji. I said, "I passed first class with excellent grades." She looked at me and said, "Surely you cried and they lied to you, they pretended [you did]." I said, "No!" And as evidence I showed her the book and that sort of film, which was a letter and had a mechanism with a movement, and with a small hole for the eye to see some images, and for me at the time they were a sort of small miracle.

As I said, I complete four years in Stubëll, and then there was the dilemma, or the crossroad of my life. Because there were only four grades in Stubëll. To continue the eight-year education, the lower cycle of the gymnasium,¹ as it was called then – I had to travel, to make a very, very troublesome trip. And I was the first generation. Before us it had never happened that anyone had undertaken such thing. The priest at that time, Father Dedë Ramaj, persuaded our family, and he persuaded us and motivated us, that without school, without education, and civilization, there wasn't any progress. So we decided... we were a group of some twelve students. And for the first year we registered in Viti. Coming and going was twenty-four kilometers. Think now, a nine-year-old child, I wasn't even ten, must face such a trip...

It was the year '59, therefore, poverty was extreme. We have never had even *opanga*,² apart from those with pig skin, which we, my mother and the oldest children, made home. All the clothes were made from wool, because back then villagers, people, could not even dream of buying them. Apart from this, it was very difficult because there was no road. We had to often face also small roads that were very risky, as they say even now, "stream of the *magjup*,"³ when it comes down from Stubëll in the direction of Viti, and where the stream is 15-20 meters. And in winter slipping was enough for an accident to happen and for you to lose your life.

Apart from this, there were no roads! There were the roads of sheep, or better say of goats, because goats pass everywhere and sheep pass with difficulty on those small roads where my friends and I walked. There was the river of Letnica, which sometimes flooded the roads we walked on. And this river had no bridge, but there was only some wooden plank that also often moved, which was often frozen and deep, like this, almost every step was a risk for your life. What was strange then, even the older Serbs in the two Serbian villages that we had to pass, unfortunately, were an obstacle for us. Verbovci and Gerqari.⁴ And not only the children, but often also the grown-ups, let off the dogs or they shouted, why we trespassed on their own place. Then we had to find some road or another small road but we damaged farming land. And the other people complained, even though they did not treat us aggressively, because they understood that we were children and somewhere... we could not fly, but we had to pass somewhere.

All I remember from childhood and youth was extraordinarily difficult and harsh. But the greatest hardship happened to me when I was three years old, when my father suddenly died. He died at his in-laws, at my late mother's family. And he died from the pain and suffering, because one week earlier, ten

¹ A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university

² Albanian shoes like moccasins, made of leather or rubber.

³ Derogatory term for Roma.

⁴ Villages in the municipality of Viti, in the mountainous area of Karadak.

days earlier, my 17 years old sister, who was named Terezë, had died. And often when I think about life, the big part of my life that I dedicated to the blessed Mother Theresa, with 15 books, with 29 years of friendship, maybe it is my unconscious looking for my sister, whom I did not know, because the death of my father vanished any memory of my sister. I was about three years old, but I was not three years old yet. My father, I remember him! I remember him as a dream, I remember him play. But I don't remember my sister at all. All this gave me even more motivation to live and work.

After the fifth year we changed to Zhegër. We changed for the reasons I mentioned: that we had obstacles, that there was a river, which was often a threat and a risk, and notably there were grown-ups who obstructed us. And at that time we met the priest, Father Dedë, and told him, "We cannot go to Viti!" And he said, "There is a solution! And the solution is Zhegër, because Zhegër is part of our Karadak, in Zhegër they are *laramanë*,⁵ they know we are Catholic and in Zhegër we have friends. Therefore we are on the same territorial side and we have the same mentality. But there is a problem."

I had never been in Zhegër before. I had gone to Terzije, which was part of the road and from which my mother came from, and I asked the priest, "And where is Zhegër?" He said, "We don't have a map, but it is about twelve kilometers to go there, and twelve kilometers to come back. But there is a problem: there are no houses." And I was happy, I said, "There are no houses, nobody will beat and threaten us." He said, "Slowly Lush, there are all hills and mountains, and there are many wolves." Then I said, "We have a solution for this!" "What is the solution," he said, "you are not afraid of wolves?" I said, "I am afraid, like everybody, like every child, but we have a strong dog, and the village has some dogs which are in the condition to fight against a wolf, and surely will defend us. And that's how we handle it."

We found the strongest four-five dogs, which were... then we called them *qejtë e hekrve*,⁶ which were, you know, always tied. And they followed us from the first step from the house, until school, until Zhegër. Very interesting! In Zhegër they did not enter the village, a small town such as Zhegër was then, but stopped and waited for the entire time until school ended. They did not fight and did not struggle with each other. They started to become friends, as we also became friends. And this saved us, because during four years I often heard the howling of wolves, notably in the winter, when they were hungrier, but fortunately, our dogs, in a way, turned into our guardian angels, they never let anything happen...

In Zhegër we were wonderfully welcomed. Zhegër is a place that I remember with much, much nostalgia and love. Because in Zhegër they accepted us as if we were from Zhegër, even better. And our luck was that in Stubëll we were all excellent students. Then they began to love us even more. During our trip there we would repeat the lessons of that day: together we studied, together we played, together we spent our

⁵ *Laramans*: crypto-Catholics, Albanians who during Ottoman times feigned to be Muslim.

⁶ Literally: caged dogs. A term used to describe untamed, savage dogs.

lives. So, Zhegër for me was and remains the school that gave me the momentum, the will, the enthusiasm for learning, studying, and life.

I remember the late director Ismajl Rama, who unfortunately died in a traffic accident ...some years earlier, when we had a sort of test and exam, the question then was, "What will you do now, after you finish eighth [grade]?" And I had already decided that I would go to the seminary to become an ordained priest, a Catholic priest. Then I wrote, "classical gymnasium."⁷ And all the other girls and boys asked me, "What is this?" Because there was a real gymnasium, but the classical gymnasium was nowhere, and the only classical gymnasium was in Dubrovnik, it was the Jesuits' gymnasium,⁸ which was recognized also by the then Yugoslav state.

Then, as I began to explain, the director, may rest in peace, Ismajl, rose... he was a gentleman, an excellent rhetorician, an extraordinarily good educator... he said, "Young kids, kids," he said, "I will now explain to you what Lush has chosen. He has chosen the best school. It prepares ordained priests."

And then he praised the Catholic clergy and said, "Do you know what? What do we speak now?" "Albanian." "We speak Albanian, because the Albanian Catholic clergy preserved the language, the tradition, the culture, and etc." And he began to mention figures that we knew a little, or we only knew the names, and he said, "Our Lush will go in their steps." I never forget that moment! And with a caress, he embraced me in front of the students, and said, "You chose the best path."

Something else I can remember is the collaboration we had. We had the chorus of the school. For the first time we went on foot from Zhegër to the school of Gjilan for a concert. We were very tired from the two-three hour trip, nevertheless we won the first place. And for the first time, then, in eighth grade, I came to Pristina, because there was a competition of the eight-year-schools of Kosovo. And this is my memory...

As the best student in the class and the school, I went to Belgrade on an excursion. And this was my first visit...the trip was by train. I had been to Skopje, but Belgrade... an environment that speaks a completely different language, because I knew Serbian a little, some salutations, coming from a village which is completely Albanian and completely Catholic. For me it was an experience, in the first place Belgrade as the capital and a large city, then in the second, I did not know how to communicate with the other schools, or with the others. And it was an experience! One memory that bothered me was, "Why don't I know Serbian or a Slavic language?" as we called them then.

⁷ Gymnasium dedicated to the study of the humanities, and focused on the classical languages of Latin and Greek.

⁸ The Diocesan Classical Gymnasium of Dubrovnik Ruđer Bošković is one of the city's oldest educational

And this is a physical and spiritual preparation for what would happen later. Because the classical gymnasium and the preparation to become a priest were not, of course, on an Albanian land. Then I had to make a request to the dioceses, which was then in Skopje and it had to be accepted. I was accepted in the Ruđer Bošković Seminary. Ruđer Bošković is a world-renowned scholar, a Jesuit. That classical gymnasium was the best known at that time in Yugoslavia.

The trip from Stubëll to Ferizaj was on foot, because there was no bus, with some big bag that was made of carton, because I did not even have a better bag. It was raining a little, that bag and everything that I had taken with me, some clothes, got wet. From Ferizaj to Belgrade. It seemed I knew Belgrade, because I had been there. From Belgrade to Sarajevo. Some 16-18, up to 20 hours. But the real adventure was Sarajevo to Dubrovnik, where there was a small train, which they called *Ćiro*, which went slowly, and when entering-exiting [stations] took place, you were supposed to chain it, then the passengers got out and walked parallel to the train. And this was an adventure for me. I thought, "Will I ever know how to return to my Stubëll?" Because the trip lasted two days and two nights.

And when I arrived in Dubrovnik, a medieval castle, now, a wonderful city, but up to that point I had learned and I had grown-up in a mountain place, where everything was green, where there were vegetables and fruits, where there were meadows, when I saw all those walls, when I saw the sea for the first time, when I saw a city which resembled our castles and *kulla*,⁹ the experience was shocking. And I began to tell myself, "Maybe I will stay here 24 hours." My changes and experience were shocking, because it was a city like it was: the pearl of the Adriatic, a medieval city, surrounded by high walls, castles, and churches. There were no trees anywhere, there was no green anywhere, there wasn't a flower, nothing. On one side there was a hill called *Serrgi*, not like our Sublovaca full of greens, it was completely rocky. On the other side, there was the sea. We were in the middle. But I did not know what I was looking at. What I saw, in shock, in fear, was the sea, all that water, and on the other side, a hill that had nothing, apart from some bush here and there. I didn't know where to rest my eye.

And after the first day and the first nights...we were about 180 students, we had our big dormitory with 10, 15, 20 beds. There were specific teaching courses. Discipline was like the one of the Jesuits: two hours of strict study, you would not dare turn your head right nor left, nor open the desk, because the desk had a board where we put our books and notebooks. They taught us to study first, and to prepare all we needed during our strict study, as it was called. If you didn't open it on time and did not pull out the books and the notebook, they stayed there, but you had no right to take them out and no right to open the desk, as it was called then...there was the technical term "*pultin*" to take out the books and the notebooks.

⁹ Traditional, fortified Albanian house, tower.

All these things for me were of course difficult, and completely insurmountable. And after two- three days I decided, I said, "I will go back!" But the problem was how to go back, with all that road. My luck was that my brother Father Ndou Gjergji, who was three years older than I, was with me, and three years at that age... I was about 14 years old, he was 17. He had waited for me to finish my eighth grade to continue studying together. I had managed to go one year earlier, he had paused. And I said, "I cannot stay here anymore." But his ability, his intelligence, his maturity in supporting me... he said, "Yes, we stay and some day we will see. We have time, we can go back when you wish. And I will go back with you." So once or twice, with this good brotherly tricks, I began slowly-slowly to settle in.

Another shock was the question of the language. I had a very strong memory then – fortunately I have it even now – so that if I read a page and closed my eyes, I knew it by heart, even if I did not understand it. But if the professor asked anything, I stopped and did not know anything. And fortunately professors were... an overwhelming part of them were Masters and Doctors of Science in different fields. When I got my grade report from my school, and when I saw that I had passed all classes with Fives¹⁰ and honors, then they called me to know what I understood, and said... the grade report would come every three months: the first three months, six months that was a semester, and then the other three months. This was the system there. And the director of the school told me, "Lush, we are not grading you in the first three months." I felt bad, "Why?" and then to make me understand, he said, "You have all good grades, you are an extraordinary student! But you don't know the language. We are giving you the chance to learn the language." And this saved me. For three months I learned the Croatian language, how beautiful, and other classical languages: old Latin, old Greek, German, Italian, French, so that when the first three months passed they did not grade me, but in the second trimester or mid-year, I was the best student and I had all Fives.

And this then gave me the will, that I would not dream... apart from the great nostalgia that I felt, because then there was no way of communicating, a letter took an entire month to get some information. There was no telephone, nor I thought about it. So, this was my experience, the experience of studying, wonderful, but an extraordinarily difficult experience for a 14 years old, with an iron discipline, with rules and norms, so that if it were not for the support of my brother, and the great will and desire to learn everything and more... because horizons were opening up.

When I was little I thought that I knew everything, because I knew all that the teacher told me. While now, with the opening of doors and windows, the horizons of science, of culture, I began to see especially the classics, the texts in Latin, I began to see art, I began to see Dubrovnik. I began to see the coast, because

¹⁰ Grade A on an A-F scale (Five-0)

we went to walk there. I remember a walk in Zara. For the first time in my life I saw *Arbanasi*¹¹ houses. And I said, “This must be linked to us!” And there I learned the history that 300 years earlier it was the Albanians who fled the victimization of the Turk-Ottomans, and found shelter there. I remember the first visit to Split, and the tomb of Diocletian, the Roman emperor with Illyrian origins, etc. You know, everything and more stayed and grew in my desire, will, and work, that often I had the feeling that I was sinning, I was making a mistake, when I was sleeping. However, it was all defined, and it was not the question that I could go somewhere else, because everything was according to the schedule. The bell and the schedule began to become a component of my life even though by nature I was very lively, and I was very dynamic. And I was at the age when I had the need to be more creative, to move more. Then the only movement was that the school and the boarding school had a small stadium, but we were 180 students... then the only sport was swimming. And I learned how to swim quickly, and in those few days when I could go out and go to the sea to swim, to bathe, to sunbathe, then I began to have another joy in my life, apart from what was the extraordinary taste and beauty of writing, reading, and all that was an extraordinary adventure in my life and youth.

Lura Limani: You mentioned that it was impossible to communicate with your family that you had left in the village, because there was no telephone. Whom did you, you and your brother, had left in the village?

Father Lush Gjergj: There was my late mother, and there were two brothers. My oldest brother Zef, who was 17 years old when my father died, later took the role of the oldest brother and father, because he raised us, he helped us, he educated us, he supported us. And the second brother, Mhilli, while the two of us, Ndou and I, were in Dubrovnik. Nostalgia was an extraordinarily difficult thing, and I could bear it only thanks to my brother and the group of Albanians who were there. And to chase away nostalgia and boredom, I read, I studied, I worked. Because that was my only salvation!

Part Two

Lura Limani: In the seminary... can you describe to us a little the life in the village, in Stubëll, before you went to the seminary.

Father Lush Gjergj: Stubëll is a mountain place, extraordinarily beautiful. I lived in Stubëll for about 14 years. Stubëll is an oasis, whose basis is the Albanian school, the first Albanian school, as it has been

¹¹ The *Arbanasi* (Albanian in Croatian) is an Albanian community in the Zadar region, Croatia. They speak a dialect of Gheg Albanian. They are known in Albanian literature as the Albanians of Zadar.

documented until now. My home, where I was born and grew up, and the church, were separated only by a street. The door of the backyard and the door of the church faced each other. So, I grew up, practically, in the yard of the church. I played different roles. I began to help in the mass, or how it is called in technical terms, I was an altar boy as a kid, for Father Dedë. I remember when I was four-five years old, and I had begun school, and that I liked the bells that I had to play during the celebration of the mass. I liked the candles that had to be lighted or carried in the procession, I liked the robes, when the nuns then sewed the garment for the altar boys.

And this was my world, in which I dreamt. I always liked the great figure of Father Dedë Ramaj, who was a priest, a spiritual father, who was an educator. Think a little! Any time, before beginning our trip to Viti or Zhegër we met in church, in the backyard, to pray. And he waited for us then. It was about five, five and a half in the morning, because mass began at seven. And he blessed us, he told us some words. And when we came back, before going to our families, we returned to the church. Thus the church was a second home for us, or to say it better, the common house for all children who went to the eight-year-school. Afterwards, one part of us went to the gymnasium.

I remember also one detail, when he came, when the inspector came. Then a sort of experiment was done. The girls were on one side, and we boys were on the other side. And the inspector came to the second grade class, and said, “You should not divide the class this way, but you must have a girl and a boy.” This was dramatic for us, because we had never learned such thing. The girls had their games, we had our games, with some ball-shaped rug because there wasn’t any ball, or with something that moved, just so that we could play, whether exercise or run, wandering through meadows, through the beautiful flowers that my birthplace had, that was for us. And I remember, I remained astounded, but also the other children were astounded: how will it happen? Especially the girls almost died standing, when they heard such thing. But I was lucky, I saw that near me was a girl whose house was 100-150 meters from mine, therefore we had grown up and had played together. So, I went through this drama very easily, also because she knew me and I knew her. But I must say that this episode discloses the worldview of the time, the world was divided in two antagonistic worlds, masculine and feminine.

I also had many other memories. I liked music very much. I did not have another instrument apart from the flute, here and there the *çifteli*.¹² And here I have one very beautiful memory and situation. Right after when school ended, then we had the sheep: fifty, eighty, up to one hundred, and I was a small shepherd who escorted the flock to pasture. The dog always came with me, it was part of life, because as I said earlier, he followed and guarded my life and the other friends’. But what is more characteristic, and I am sorry that back then we did not have any possibility to record it or film it, my dog was very musical. He had

¹² Two-string instrument with a long neck, played in Northern Albania and Kosovo, used to play folk songs and epics.

affinity for music. And as I picked up a flute (pretends to play a flute with his fingers), and played some note of some song, he looked at me, he stared at me, and perfectly followed me with his woof. I can say that he did not get any note wrong. And he sat near, and this usually always happened. Any time I picked up an instrument, especially the flute, he sat near me, stared at me, and with his woof he followed the song or the melody that I played with the flute.

It was an extraordinary thing. I told the story some times, here and there and around the world, and anywhere I was asked, "Do you have any documentation?" What documentation could I have at that time, in the conditions in which we lived, apart from the lively memory that I have even today. And I remember with real nostalgia that this dog had an affinity, that it was so close, that every day...for example, there was a small bag, I had bread and water, or something, but he never touched it, he always guarded it until I took something, neither he came close if I took the bag and opened it to eat something. He looked shy. Only then, when I handed him something, then of course he took it with happiness. These are childhood memories, which I will never forget.

Lura Limani: Very interesting! When was it the first time that you came back after you went to Dubrovnik to study?

Father Lush Gjergj: Yes, it was the first year of the gymnasium. I was registered in the gymnasium in the year 1963, thus the school year of 1964. And nine months, ten months, were too long. But fortunately my interests grew. The desires to write, to read, to learn, to read, were all very great, and I was successful, I became enthusiastic. So I had no doubt that this was my life, my path. However nostalgia and the two contrasts of what was the village life in Stubëll, and life in a city of science, culture, medieval art, such as Dubrovnik or Ragusa, they were really two worlds. But fortunately, the doors and the windows of a world that until then for me was completely unknown and imaginary, were opened there.

Lura Limani: How did you decide to study farther away, in Italy?

Father Lush Gjergj: My call to become a priest is also interesting, and here maybe it is better that we go back. Because this happened before I went to Dubrovnik and the gymnasium. A tragedy happened in Stubëll. We began to build a church, because the old church that was also the first Albanian school was already so small, that when we were in the building we were in each other's arms. We opened the doors and the windows, but it was impossible. Often people fainted during the mass, even in the peak of winter. And the priest then, the late father Domenik Ramaj, or Dedë as we called him, who was from Stubëll, asked for a permit and began to build the church.

It was about 1958, '59, and UDBA¹³ at that time, especially Ranković¹⁴...and here I have the bitter experience of weapons collection. Here I have the fear that we had at night. Of course at that time only Gjilan had electricity, there was no electricity in Viti, but the terror of the long nights. And we waited in the nightmare that Ranković police, UDBA, would come and look for weapons. Here I will connect briefly with what is historical in my calling, how God called me, and how I answered that calling.

As I said, Father Dedë began to build the new church. And at that time UDBA wanted to put him in jail at any cost, wanted to terrorize the village, and in a way make a normal life impossible, if one can call it normal in such situation. So, they found a trap: they found two men who killed a first cousin of Father Dedë in an ambush, and they said that Father Dedë said in confession... confession is an absolute secret when the faithful come to ask for forgiveness or forgiveness of sins... and in this way they killed David Ramaj, who was the first cousin of Father Dedë Ramaj.

And the tragedy happened! He was stopped... never earlier in my life I had heard... I was in sixth grade, and I came back hungry and thirsty from Zhegër. My late mother had prepared meat, bread, something else... And a woman came, and said, “*Dada*¹⁵ Dile, have you heard?” My mother gave her a sign to not talk about how David Ramaj was killed by a knife, worse than a pig, than a pork. And I remember, I... not only I stopped eating, I stopped breathing. I did not have the strength to take a bite or something. I looked at my mother, I looked at my brother, I looked at that woman. For the first time in my life I heard, “He has been killed, a man has been killed!” And, think a little. Father Dedë was sentenced 14 years of prison, the killers, one two years, the other four. And they were not held in prison even for those years.

This was a blow, and it was connected to my calling. I returned from Zhegër, they stopped us before the doors of the house, of our yard, of the doors of the church. And one police who spoke Serbian, then an Albanian police who translated, said, “Do you know the criminal Domenik Ramaj?” For me, in the first place Domenik was unknown, because I always called him Dedë. Second, I understood “criminal,” and the Albanian said, “Police is asking...” As the youngest, perhaps also the chattier, the courageous one, I said, “I am sorry, but he is not a criminal, he is the father of all of us.” And then the police wanted to punch me with his fist. Fortunately I sat down, fell to the ground and he did not hit me. They kept us one hour there. Our legs and hands trembled from tiredness, from hunger, from terror because they were 15-20 police armed to the teeth. And after some time, Father Dedë came out with his hands tied in the back, with a

¹³ *Uprava državne bezbednosti* (State Security Administration), with the additional “a” for *armije*, Yugoslav army.

¹⁴ Aleksandar Ranković (1909-1983) was a Serb partisan hero who became Yugoslavia’s Minister of the Interior and head of the Military Intelligence after the war. He was a hardliner who established a regime of terror in Kosovo, which he considered a security threat to Yugoslavia, from 1945 until 1966, when he was ousted from the Communist Party and exiled to his private estate in Dubrovnik until his death in 1983

¹⁵ Turkish: *dadi*, a nanny. In Albanian, the term takes the meaning of respectful address towards older women

look that seemed like Jesus when they led him to the cross, and when Mary looked at him with great pain and walked step by step towards him.

Father Dedë stopped, and looked at us. I felt that in that look he asked me, he said, “I am going to prison, but who will protect our church, our village?” And just as this horrible procession of police passed, before and after him, I saw the scene of the cross, fell on my knees, and said to God, “If you ask me and you want it, I will take your path and call. I want to replace Father Dedë!” And this was in sixth grade. Two years later, when I finished eighth grade, this desire and search, and this calling of mine, became practically even stronger.

Lura Limani: Did you return to Stubëll in the end to replace Father Dedë?

Father Lush Gjergj: No, I never served in Stubëll. I finished four years of gymnasium in Dubrovnik, afterwards, the first year of Philosophy in Split. And after the year 1968, until the year 1975, I was in Rome for seven years, where I finished... I have a Masters in Philosophy, I graduated in Theology, and contemporaneously to Theology I graduated from the State University of La Sapienza, at the Institute of Psychology, Psychology, and also became a Doctor with the thesis, “The role of the Albanian woman in the family and society.” Finally I returned to Kosovo in the year 1975. At the time the Bishop was Monsignor Nikë Prela, and he appointed me his personal secretary and vicar in Ferizaj. I served there for 18 years, and there my work of writing and publishing in the religious-cultural magazine *Drita* began, with many publications, volumes, articles, talks and papers that I began to give in former Yugoslavia, or Yugoslavia back then, especially in Croatia and Slovenia, later in Italy, where I lived seven years and which was almost like my second country, and later in Europe and the world.

Here I must connect also with the first meeting with Mother Theresa. I knew Mother Theresa through stories. My paternal aunt, Mrikë Gjergji, was a household nun, you know, who does not wear the robe of a nun, but was dedicated, and spent her life helping the dioceses in Macedonia or in Kosovo. She was also contemporaneous to Mother Theresa and had known her as a young girl in Skopje. There is even a story, a very beautiful episode in which Gonxhë opened the heart of my aunt, Mrikë Gjergji, and said, “Mrikë, I have decided to become a missionary nun and go to India.” And my aunt said, “Oh Gonxhë, do you know where is India? You cannot find it on the map.” Then she said, “Dear, you are so weak that you will not get there alive!” And Gonxhë then gave her a fantastic answer, which is also prophetic and providential. She said, “Mrikë, if God calls me, then it is not by my strength or my work that I will arrive or will not arrive there. If he calls me, let him think and let him finish the job. I believe that he called me!”

Later, my mother too had met her, and especially a priest who is very known, the best historian of Christianity among us, but also in the Albanian world, Doctor Gaspër Gjini, who wrote the book, *The Dioceses of Skopje-Prizren during centuries*, where he presents two thousand years of Christianity among

Albanians. In fact he died young at 55, in the year 1985. [At] This [time of the] year is also the anniversary of his death. The year when I had written the request to be accepted in the seminary, '68, he held the mass for the day of Saint Anthony in Binça, which is near Viti. And he dedicated the whole sermon to Mother Theresa, and he said, "Saint Anthony made many miracles across the world, and you all know, and honor, and love him, and are gathered today. But I will tell you that we have a great and wonderful figure, whose name is Mother Theresa, who makes miracle in India and in the world." And he filled the spirit with happiness, the heart with happiness, and I began to have more and more curiosity from what my mother, from what my aunt, from what from his sermon [said]. Later I found, and how...in *The Voice of Our Lady of Montenegro*, which was back then of the Catholic Church in Kosovo, which was published in Skopje, there thus I found 10-15 lines, "Gonxhë Bojaxhiu, now Mother Theresa, works with the ill, with the lepers." And there I am today! I kept it as a great and holy memory. And thus I began to be interested.

In Rome, in the year 1968, where I went in September, October, one month later they gave the news that Mother Theresa was coming to Rome because she was invited by the then Pope Paul VI. I did not sleep the whole night. I was excited, I began to write questions and what...But everything fell into the water, because when I went there, she welcomed my friends and me with such cordiality, warmth and love, like a mother, as if we had grown up together! She took my hand [joins his hands] to listen the pulsing of my veins and my heart. She asked about Skopje. We as kids knew little or nothing about her time, and her Skopje. However, the experience was extraordinary, and I wrote in my journal, "She is a saint and a miracle, and I will never separate from her."

Thus my research began, and later I curated 15 volumes which I dedicated to her, and which have been translated in 34-35 world languages not because I have written them, but because Mother Theresa is known and loved in the whole world. Fortunately I saved the majority [of those volumes], because today they would have disappeared and and would have been less known and before me no biography knew anything more than her name and her last name. There was no photograph of her, nor of her mother Drane, her father Kolë, her brother Lazër, her sister Age, nor of Prizren, where her family was from, not Skopje, not Letnicë, where she had lived. And fortunately I researched, traced, and saved everything that was and is for me a precious, spiritual and cultural treasure, and not only for me, but for all Albanians and for everybody, the whole world.

Part Three

I was a student in Rome in 1968, and because Mother Theresa came to Rome, then we went and met her. And it was a first meeting that continued until she passed away, some 29 years later, in different time zones. Especially I met...there are two or three unforgettable moments: the Nobel Prize, when she asked that I accompany her to Oslo for seven days. With her... I felt also embarrassed to be near her and afraid

of bothering her. I thought, "I am so small," and she told me, "You can only change side: on the right or the left of me." And she took my hand, my arm, and said...she had a life, a joy, a natural great joy, and she said, "Lastly, Father Lush, can't you see..." and she had a very simple bag, people, some gave her the money, some gave her a check, some gave her a letter, and she told me, "You take care of it better, because I will lose them if you are not here," just to give me a reason to be near her.

And the days I spent in Calcutta, where I went when she was ill, and where she was on her deathbed, and fortunately she survived and it passed. And there I experienced things...I thought about writing them, but they are unspeakable, because Calcutta is the capital of suffering and misery, the capital of pain and grieving, the capital of caste divisions and all that, turned into a city of goodness and love thanks to the life and work of Mother Theresa.

Later I accompanied her to all time zones, especially in South Eastern Europe, then Social- Communist Europe, Croatia, Slovenia, of course in our area, Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, then Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and we went wherever it was open. Because through me Mother Theresa rediscovered once again our Albanian world and as much as it was joyful it was also hurtful, the older she got, she got more homesick. She felt my absence so much, that if I had to leave for half an hour during the day, when I returned she asked me, "But where are you?" Because through me she had made me a sort of return to what the church meant among the Albanian people, to the Albanian world.

I remember, this is the 25th anniversary of the reconciliation of blood feuds, when I was in Bucharest on May 3...on May Day, I had participated in the Verrat e Llukës [gathering], when a miracle happened, half a million people came to celebrate the reconciliation. And I showed her some photographs, I showed something. And she...her wrinkles (marks his face with his hands) her face, was so teary! Tears of joy. She opened her arms and said, "Oh God, my Albanian people are forgiving and reconciling!" And she handwrote also two messages, "I would like to come and celebrate together with my people the reconciliation of blood. And I greet the Albanian Kosovar youth and all those who made this great and saintly work." Later the situation changed. She announced that she was coming, and we were ready for her arrival in the Bistrazin in Gjakova, however the circumstances were such. At the time, through the Vatican, America had signaled that some massacres of the population could happen, of all the population. And for Mother Theresa and us, it was painful for her, and painful for us that she could not [come], but she was always supportive. When I told her that in the reconciliation of blood people often also mentioned her name, she lost her voice, she could not speak from the emotion {voice trembles because of emotion}.

Lura Limani: It's very good that you mentioned the reconciliation of blood, because I would like to ask you to tell us more about the establishment of the association *Nëna Tereza*¹⁶ and about the work you did for the reconciliation of blood.

Father Lush Gjergj: The foundation of the association *Nëna Tereza* was a necessity. As her biographer, I was the vicar and the secretary of the Bishop in Ferizaj. To tell you the truth, I was not the initiator. Many think that it was an initiative of mine. At the time the vicar in Pristina was Father Zef Gashi, today he is the Archbishop of Bar, in Montenegro. And one group of intellectuals thought it out, talked about it and said, "One hundred and fifty thousand persons are unemployed because they did not accept Serbia as their country and Milošević as their head of state." And then they wanted to self-organize. Our oath was this, "Not poor, nor lacking dignity."

And the late Doctor Engjëll Sedaj came to Ferizaj, with his brother Franklin Sedaj, who is still alive, a lawyer, with another group of people, and they said to the late Bishop, Nikë Prela, "We must do something." As they talked a bit, the Bishop called me and said, "You must take the leadership of this humanitarian, charitable association." I said, "Excellency, you know how much I work, I am not making it and I am a small man in a big world, I am like a mouse in a pumpkin." He said, "Only you and nobody else." I said, "I obey." And I accepted. We made the preparation for May 10 of 1991. We founded it here in Pristina. We did a statute, we did everything that needed to be done, we registered. It was our luck, it was God's providence, because there could not have been a humanitarian charitable association of Kosovo *Nëna Tereza*. . . the Albanian world has died more easily from guns than from hunger and poverty. A popular revolt would have happened, of all the people, or they would be subject to what was the strategy and the politics of submission that Serbia had for us.

Fortunately, neither this nor that happened, because our people have heart. And here we began to live to survive. We began to live to help and give each other. We had also branches not only in Kosovo, but also in Macedonia, and in Montenegro. And we expanded also in different states of Europe, also America, firstly in our fellow citizens' community. Later we expanded also among all others. Sister organizations such as Caritas of the Catholic Church, and other organizations and associations, when they saw and understood what was happening, helped us. Later, the Albanian people in Kosovo, from the year 1990 until the year 1999, until the arrival of NATO, lived from charity and providence. And this is the most powerful evidence of what can be a person who is inspired, motivated, and believes in values and virtues.

¹⁶ Mother Theresa, the self-help organization that during the 1990s, at the height of Milošević's repression, supported the parallel society of Albanians, expelled from all state institutions and services.

Think a little! And this other question you asked, it is closely connected to it. We were in a conflict, nobody exactly knew this. When we began the campaign for reconciliation, I remember the first conversation with the great, the marvelous Professor Anton Çetta. He said, "Father Lush, perhaps, perhaps they are hundreds." While they were thousands! And when we began this campaign, we did not know who are the wounded and the killed, but as I said, what is the cancer of the Albanian society. And God's willing, our youth's willing, I understood thanks to the ex-political prisoners, who had come back from prison, and were beaten, crushed by Serbian violence, but were full of enthusiasm and with the will to live. And they could barely wait for someone to propose something.

And while we talked and explained... we could not guard both the front and the back. We had to have our back, and our back, our background, is the brotherhood of all Albanians. And only thus... because we all understood that whenever the time will come, when the war knocks on our doors and on our heart, the time will come to face this question. And today, in the promotion of the book by Behram Hoti, I said, "We broke a prejudice and a tradition which says that, 'An Albanian never forgives, and blood is never lost'." And we proved that an Albanian forgives, and forgives wonderfully if the veins of communication are found. And if an Albanian is motivated, he does not lose blood, because we don't have too much blood and life, but we honor their blood by building a culture of life and a civilization of love, which is the origin of peace, freedom and democracy, which came later.

However, our people, there are people who talk from the heart of hearts, and who know how to explain and prove that this is not our tradition, this is not a good tradition. I deciphered vengeance, or vendetta in this way: that firstly it is suicide, is the killing of brothers, because it kills a brother or a sister, and only in the end it is the killing of someone else. And when the people understand, they enter a logic of life, a logic of freedom, a logic that we have been killed enough, crushed and been enslaved by others. Will we always be the heir, the generation of Cain? Will we always be those whom this tradition, or this bell,¹⁷ took by the throat, and makes us say that Albanians kill, say that this is our tradition, won't we understand that this is a trap? And this is a risk, today and in the future.

However, with these two life experiences, with the reconciliation of blood, with the humanitarian and charity association of Kosovo, I have stomped everywhere in Kosovo, there is no plain where I did not go... dark hidden places, where I have seen from up close the suffering and the misery, where I have seen eyes that were luminous, such as those I saw in Calcutta, from hunger, from poverty, where I have seen people who don't have anything to lay down on, not a bed, they don't have clothes, and they are embarrassed

¹⁷ Here Dom Lush uses a pastoral image, the bell constricting animal's throat, to describe how the blood feuds, the institution of vengeance, has devalued Albanian tradition. As the bell itself, the killings as an act of vengeance had become a loud and an ugly marker constricting Albanian tradition.

because they don't have with what to cover their naked body with. I began to love my people more and more.

And once, I invented, made up, also this story: an old man and an old woman stand by the fire, today we call it fireplace, then it was *oxhaku*, and they talk. It was the time of the reconciliation of blood. The children had grown up and already gone. And the old man, while exhales the smoke out of his pipe and smoking, smoking, said to the woman, "My wife, lady of the house, may I say what I have not told anyone?" And she said, "Oh man, it is fifty, sixty... how many years are we together, whom would you say it to if you didn't tell me?" He said, "I am afraid you won't understand!" "But who could understand you better than I, and you me?" And the old man, rubbing and twisting his moustache, looking at the reaction of his wife, said, "I am telling you! Just sit so that you don't fall down because you might not be able to stand!" And the woman sat on a small three-legged stool, and said, "Tell, *mor!*"¹⁸ "I am in love." The woman held her head, said, "Man, we married our children, we have grandchildren, and you say this?" He said, "Wait my lady, let me finish now that I began the conversation and the talk, I am in love with you until the end."

And this was an experience that I had with my people. Because I also once understood and saw that we are a wonderful people if we know how to meet, converse, communicate directly with each other, and if we know how to motivate, to inspire. The reconciliation of blood, charity, and the parallel health and school system for me were and still remain the miracles of our time. While those who forgave blood are really the greatest heroes whom the Albanian people had, and fortunately also a part of those heroes are still alive and are among us. I am sorry that this story, such as charity and reconciliation, has not been recorded as it should have been in textbooks and in studies. The world has done Masters theses and Doctoral theses about us, and we are asleep and in a nightmare, and we don't discover and rediscover, like the old man, the love for our people, the love for those that are authentic Albanian, Illyrian-Albanian values.

[The following parts of the interview have been recorded on May 25, 2015]

Part Four

The blood reconciliation happened this way and with this methodology: God willing Anton Çetta was taken with the people's treasure, with folklore... God prepared him long ago. As a student he had been everywhere. For him Drenica was an oasis, to say it metaphorically, a mine, where he discovered Albanian tradition, culture, phraseology, and folklore. So he knew... he was among the best scholars who knew the

¹⁸ Colloquial: used to emphasize the sentence, it expresses strong emotion. *More* adds emphasis, like *bre*, similar to the English bro, brother.

people, who knew the folk spirit. Wherever we went, Anton said, “On this day, on this date, I was in this *oda*,¹⁹ where this child was born,” and the child appeared, and he wasn’t a child, he was thirty or forty years old, and he said, “It is me!”

The group around Anton Çetta, the friends, the collaborators of his, created the first core, which was a new openness, together with the young ex-prisoners, who had a very bitter experience in the Serbian or Yugoslav prisons, and who had the desire that, “Our people cannot remain in this situation. We must liberate ourselves.” And liberation could not happen without spiritual cleansing, with enmity among Albanians.

The logic was very simple: if the Serbs kill us, and there were about 15 youth killed in peaceful demonstrations, they held flowers in their hands and the tanks trampled on and killed our youth, then they would say... The logic is this: the state is killing us, we cannot take vengeance, we cannot do anything. When we are in conflict, or some misunderstanding or some disagreement is happening to us, or God forbid a killing among Albanians, we take vengeance. What logic is this? At the time, we had to see that we were facing a risk that was much bigger and was systematic, and was structural: the army, police, and the state which wanted to exterminate us.

And this logic was easy to understand. Of course we couldn’t say this publicly, but we began to say it in small circles. And the first reconciliations were very difficult, because people asked us, “Are you Albanian, have you learned Albanian?” (smiles). Because they could not understand how was it possible that one would say, “They killed my brother, they killed my father, they killed my son, and you are telling me to forgive them? We will not forgive.” While slowly-slowly, in discussions, with the great wisdom, with the extraordinary experience of Professor Anton Çetta and his collaborators, with practically the Central Council, which we established in Pristina, we were organized in a capillary way in all Kosovo. Every municipality had a Municipal Council of reconciliation. And there were intellectuals, representatives of different faiths – whether Muslim or Catholic – and there were teachers, instructors, public figures, I mean, all those who had some influence, and were known and accepted by the people.

So this went slowly. The core was sound. Our luck was this, “We don’t ask to love the killers. A killer does not deserve anything. A killer is a killer, a killer is a criminal. A killer has committed something that is not human, and not Albanian. But we ask in the name of the one who is rotting away. And above all, we would like to help you and to free you from a burden, because you live in anguish, and you live with a duty, you are left hanging with the task of taking the blood of your killer. However, we are with you, unconditionally. Blood is priceless, there is no replacement, there is nothing.”

¹⁹ Men’s chamber in traditional Albanian society

These two moments were our legs that helped us. Anton Çetta was our head; our youth was our heart; those who reached out to reconciliation and forgiveness were our hands, while we, who walked, who run here and there, were the legs who helped the people. And people began to look at forgiveness as the condition for freedom. And people began to celebrate ... take just Verrat e Llukës, where they were surrounded by tanks and the people not only were free of fear, but I have seen our youth open their shirts and spit on the tanks and say, "Kill me, I came to celebrate life, to celebrate the reconciliation of my people." However this was a power, an inspiration that could not be stopped. In the beginning, as I said, the people had to understand who we were, the people had to understand what we wanted, that we had to be liberated, because people were buried alive, the majority of those who had their family members killed were buried alive. They lived for revenge.

And I remember a case, for example, two sisters who had one brother – a brother of desire or *hasret*²⁰ as people said, and had sworn, "We will not marry until we draw blood for our brother!" And time passed, and they were 40 years old. And believe me! They were devastated by pain, suffering, by this situation. And they did not have a girl's or a woman's feature. They did not have women's or men's features or characteristics. And, in Verrat e Llukës, one of them approached me, she called me, "Father Lush! Father Lush!" Because I could not come down of a big stage, I said to *bac*²¹ Anton, "Can I...get down?" He said, "No, don't get down, can't you see how many people are there. But tell her to come." She came. I said, "What do you want, sister?" She said, "I want to forgive the blood of my brother!" "Very well, I said, but there are thousands blood feuds waiting to be forgiven. Do you see how many they are?" There were more than 35 blood feuds that were forgiven spontaneously, 120 were ready. I said, "And what will you say?" "Let me speak," she said. I said, "But what will you say?" "I will say: they killed my brother, but today I have discovered that you are all my brothers and sisters." I went and said to *bac* Anton {his voice trembles} and Zeqë, I said, "You think that Father Lush is the greatest Cicero and orator of the Albanians or the world. I found an orator, she will say something that nobody said." And she came, and tearing up she said, "They killed my brother, but today I have discovered that you are all my brothers and sisters."

You know, these were the experiences, miraculous events. Or the case of Kamenicë, when an old man, whose son had been killed, took a walking stick and went to the gate of the yard and knocked on the door of the house of the killer. And everybody went crazy because they thought the old man had taken some weapon, or a mine, or a bomb to drop, and the old man said, "Is there the man of the house?" And the women, frightened, came out and said, "He is not here." He said, "I came for you. Tell the man of the house to come out." They opened the *oda*, and he said, in brief, "I have come for you. I know that it is more difficult for you than for me. My son eats soil and rots away. Your sons killed him. But you are buried alive,

²⁰ Turk: *hasret*, craving or longing. In Albanian traditional families the only son is called *hasret*. The term describes the patrilineal logic, the desire or the longing for a son, a male heir.

²¹ *Bac*, literally uncle, is an endearing and respectful Albanian term for an older person.

because the pain, the worry for what happened, makes you suffer even more. I have come to stretch my hand to you and to forgive you the blood of my son.”

These are things that cannot be found in folktales, nor in Greek mythology, when a man loves so much the other who is a killer, to the point of thinking of his well being. And this is the logic: the good became the common good for the good of the Albanian people. And this is the biggest achievement that we had, and we must say, even today, that we are each other’s limbs. And with the blood reconciliation, with the association *Nëna Tereza*, with the parallel health and school system, we really proved that in our spirit and heart there are good, noble, friendly and brotherly feelings, and a strengthened pan-Albanian brotherhood.

Part Five

Lura Limani: Can you tell us some specific case that took place in the 1990s? Especially not in Pristina, not in the largest cities, but in other places that you visited.

Father Lush Gjergji: Yes, I will tell you the case of the Kodra e Trimave, here in Pristina. I was with the Italian TV Rai Uno, at the time the director was Giulio Borelli, later he became director, at the time he was deputy director. And he came, and the police followed all our steps, even though they had gotten permission to film from Belgrade. And when we entered a house, I shall say it was more a shack, because it was not a house but a shack, because the roof was half broken, it was raining. The cameraman began to film, the people were laying down on the ground, we did not know if they were alive or dead from poverty, hunger, or something else. And on one precise moment the rain stopped, and the sunlight penetrated. And the old man said, “You brought me the sun!” (his voice trembles). And the cameraman filmed this as a paradigm, an anticipation of what would happen. And in the documentary there is a very beautiful scene. Giulio Borelli told me, “Never in my life I have filmed anything like this.” The rain was so strong, that we did not know any more where we were. We were like mice, completely wet, not only those who were there, but we too. And on one precise moment, all that storm stopped. The sun came out and the sunlight, and then here and there in the corners we would see the members of that family sheltered.

Giulio Borelli told me, “Ask for how long nobody came, or they did not eat.” I told him, “I feel bad about asking such thing, but since you are a friend of mine, and you have come and I will ask.” And I asked the man of the house, “For how long nobody came, nobody entered the house?” He said, “You mean where we are?” Because they had been displaced, that was not their home, it was a shelter, because they had a house as miners of Trepça. He said, “Do you mean where we are?” I said, “Yes friend.” He said, “Here only the devil and the police can come, nobody else.” And when he asked, “How long have you not had bread?” He said, “I forgot bread long ago.”

I mean, these were really horrible things and scenes, which stay in my memory. When we came down Kodra e Trimave, there was a large crowd of people, and I asked them, "What is it, what has happened?" And they said...it was the time when the soldiers who had been allegedly killed, Albanians who committed suicide, were brought back to Kosovo. And I asked who was the relative, the man, in this case of death, the father or the brother, and said, "I am with the Italian Television Rai Uno," and I knew very well, though I did not have all the documentation, that they were not suicides, but someone had killed him and brought him back.

The man of the house - someone had recognized me, "Father Lush Gjergji!" - had come out. And he said to me, "Good that God brought you here." I said, "I know that is not good, but thank God it will be better! They killed your son and they closed the coffin, they sealed it. Would you do me a favor, a courageous act?" "Whatever you want! For you I would give my entire family." I said, "No, I am only asking one thing: that they open the coffin and we will film with the camera of the Italian television Rai Uno." He dispersed the people, and he dispersed also the members of the Yugoslav army who were there and he said to them, "We have a ritual, we have to mourn the victim." And we entered the room. He opened [the coffin]. He had five bullets in the back. And we filmed it. And this was the argument, the first evidence that was given to the world through Rai Uno, that these were not suicides, but murders. They were represented as such only to destroy the moral and the will of the people.

However, I have experiences and experiences in every place. But what is more wonderful, I saw that our people has a heart, a spirit, and feelings. And that people, when they share their feelings, are marvelous. They have their heart and their life in the palm of their hands. And my people gave me one hundred times more than I have given them (his voices trembles), because wherever we have been, anything we proposed, often times they told me, "Don't waste words. Tell us what to do!"

Lura Limani: Can you tell us what happened to the church during the 1990s? Have you been persecuted as a priest?

Father Lush Gjergji: Of course.

Lura Limani: As a priest, how difficult has it been to perform your duties?

Father Lush Gjergji: Yes, the Serbian state identified us as the greatest enemies at the time of Serbia, or Yugoslavia. Because they wanted to represent Christians as allegedly persecuted, and that here we have this war of the Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. Under the leadership of Bishop Monsignor Nikë Prela, once we said, "Prove us this, then we can say that we are [at war], but you talk and speculate about

things that did not happen, because Albanians respect all faiths, and all religious institutions and God, this is not true." And at the time they started also to hit and mistreat and put in jail our Catholic clergy.

I remember the poisoning of the children and the youth. I was in Ferizaj, and my church was open, it was the place where the refugees and we lived, and we turned it into an improvised hospital. And when the army came, and they searched with automatic weapons, they pushed the weapon to my throat and said to me, "These are actors. And you want to blame us." And I answered, "With this method, with this weapon, you terrorize and horrify the youth..." It was the case that we could not keep four-five persons without tying them up because they shook like possessed people. And I said, "Until I am alive, you cannot enter." And we looked at each other and they said, "You will pay dearly for this." "What is dearer than life?" I answered. Or there was the case during the bombing. I was in Binça. I had 250-350, up to 500 people in the church, in the parish house, with the sisters.

Our church was a target, during the years it was systematically persecuted, because they asked from us an alleged solidarity of Christians who were persecuted on one side by Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, and by others, even by cannibalism. And this is proven, as I said, in the case of the poisoning of the children. But also during NATO bombing, when the only structure left in Kosovo was the Catholic Church. The late President Rugova, when he met Pope John Paul II, said, "Kosovo is half destroyed, and only the Catholic clergy and Church are left as a structure." We never asked anyone which nation they were, which language they spoke, and what faith do they have or not have, but we could...

I remember in Binça, that people often came without shoes, half naked, because they had been told, "If you don't leave the house in two, three minutes, we will burn you alive in your house, or we will kill you." Someone came from the door, someone from the windows... I had 35 children under ten who did not know where their parents were. I had people who were sick, with different traumas, etc. etc. Every night they looked for me and said, "If we find you tomorrow we will burn you alive." On one case my answer was this, "If you do that, I would like that you satisfy only one desire, for which good deed that I have done to Serbs here, do you want to do this to me?" Because even during bombing, and during the war and after the war, I have helped also poor, threatened, at risk, Serbian families, because for me a person is not Serbian or Albanian, but is a person, a brother or sister of mine.

However, this is a period that reminds me of the great saying of my friend, one of my greatest friend, Monsignor Nikë Prela, who told me, "Father Lush, we have experienced everything, apart from death. But what can be experienced by a living being, we have experienced it." Today I often say in a dialogue with him and in my prayers, "You experienced also death, while I remained to witness what we did together."

But then, I had the extraordinary luck that to have met the greatest personalities and figures, both Albanian and from the world. Here, I must mention Anton Çetta, a person who never, never, lost his

patience. And at the time when they rejected us, and the time when they told us, “You are at the service of Serbs, because you tell us to forgive.” And when they grabbed us by the hand and kind of kicked us out, we said, “You pulled us outside through the door, we will enter by the window.” And thus also often happened that we came back and we succeeded in reconciling blood.

Not to talk about the friendship, the brotherhood and the many years of collaboration, from ‘81, with our late president Ibrahim Rugova. With him we traveled across the meridians of Europe and the world, knocking on the door and the heart, on the conscience of Europe and the world, that we are a people that does not want anything, apart from wanting and asking for freedom, living in peace and in harmony with ourselves and with each other.

I have Mother Theresa, by whom I am always inspired and motivated, Pope John Paul II, who was a friend since when he was the cardinal of Cracow, and so on and so forth. This year I finished a book, a monograph, *My Friends Forever*. They are 41 people who from the year 1975, when I returned from Rome, and until the beginning of this year, and who are not with us anymore, have been people who gave a lot to my mind and my heart, they are the core of what I am.