

IN SEARCH FOR GRANDFATHER

By Përparim Vasolli

I can remember when I began to ask questions, “Why don’t I have grandfathers like everybody else? Where is my family tree?” My father always answered vaguely, until he could not hide the truth anymore. “They were killed,” he said. “By whom?” I asked. For a long time, he kept repeating, “I don’t know.” Later, I found out it had been *četniks*.

My paternal grandfather, Qërim Vasolli, 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, *četniks* came to the area and killed Qërim’s five brothers. Only he and a younger brother survived the massacre and escaped to Pristina. My father Ragip was five years old when Qërim disappeared. His mother Sherife died four years later. This is why we know nothing about my father’s family.

In 1943 my mother’s father Ram Berisha was killed with his brother Bajram in Lower Svirca, a village near Gjilan, at the eastern border with Serbia. *Četniks* tied them to a tree and cut first their limbs, then their heads. His wife Halime was pregnant with my mother, who is a beautiful woman and her name is, appropriately, Bukurie. Halime left with all her children to find protection at her brother Zuk Leci’s house in Gmica. In those days one could not find protection from the UN, the OSCE, or KFOR. In that area, Zuk, a very tough man, was the UN. Bukurie has no memory of what happened to her father, but we know something about his murder because his older son Shaip was 16 at the time.

We have nothing of Qërim except this ID-size photo that has become my iPhone screen saver. Rukie, the woman who married his brother and took care of my father when he became an orphan, gave it to me in 2001. I always called Rukie’s children aunts and uncles, and their children cousins. Growing up, they were the only family I knew. They were the only family my father knew.

For a while after his brothers’ massacre Qërim visited his family in Pristina, but only at night. He never slept home. Was he in hiding in the mountain? From whom? Was he fighting? After he lost his five brothers he ran away. We know he was arrested in 1946-47 and taken to the prison of Požarevac, from which he escaped with a friend. His friend did not make it. It was the winter 1947-48.

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 he never came back.

My father tried, in his way, to find Qërim. When he grew up he looked for cousins in Orlan. People remembered the massacre, but many had left for Turkey during the 1950s big migration. My father went to Turkey and found a cousin, not a close one though, who told him whatever he knew. Not much.

In 1968 my father contacted Radio Roma, which had a program on missing people. It was hard to communicate back then, there was no phone, we had the first phone in 1974. I don't even know how he contacted the Radio, perhaps by mail, telegraph, or radio. They told him that yes, there was a Qërim Vasolli fighting in Cyprus as a mercenary. He was missing in action. He must have had an interesting life. What did he do in Cyprus? Did he survive? Maybe, as a mercenary, he got to a point where he thought he should run away to save his life.

More recently my younger brother, who is good with computers, found a program where you write a name in and get all the people in the world who have the same name. We found many Vasolli in Argentina, with Albanian first names such as Iliriana and Adriana. We thought we had a good shot at finding relatives, because Vasolli is a very rare name even here. I contacted these people. I called a girl who said, "Yes, my name is Vasolli but I have nothing to do with Kosovo." I also called a Vasolli in Boston, but the woman who answered the phone was older and she cursed me, "Leave me in peace." Maybe she was afraid I was after her money.

We know only one other story about my grandfather, which is linked to my mother's family. When my father met my mother and proposed her, they had to talk to her uncle Zuk Leci to ask for permission. Zuk was a mountain of a man, with long moustaches. He was the toughest man in the area, they always called him to mediate blood feuds. When he spoke, you had to follow his orders. The only boy in a family of nine sisters, he was twelve when he killed the Serbian gendarmes - it was the Kingdom of Yugoslavia then - who had murdered his father. He had to take to the mountains to escape capture, but after a few years they caught him and sent him to prison.

My grandmother approached him about Ragip's request to marry Bukurie. He asked, "What is his father's name?" She said, "Qërim." Zuk gave his consent without hesitation. "Yes, of course, he was in prison with his brother, I remember him, he had his brother sleep on top of him," he said. In those days, inmates slept on concrete floor, and Qërim protected his younger brother that way.

That's what we heard from Zuk. I know nothing else about my grandfather Qërim, but I never stopped looking for him. I even put his picture on my Facebook profile once. Who knows, I thought, maybe somebody recognizes him.

I knew more about my maternal grandfather, at least I knew he had been killed. I also tentatively knew where he might have been buried. After the war, and after I settled down and could take time off to conduct my search, I went to Svirca.

I knew that a man from a nearby village had taken the mutilated bodies of the two Berisha brothers and buried them somewhere. Nobody knew where. I tried to find that man, but I found instead Naim

Veligllava. Naim is young and lives with his wife and two children in a village of one, called in fact Veligllava. Nature is beautiful there, there is nobody, only Naim and his family. His house was the only one where I saw lights when I was walking up the mountain. I told him about my grandfather and he promised he would help.

One week later he called me. He had found someone who knew the Berisha's burial place. I took with me my uncle Shaip, now an old man. We found a grave marked by two stones. I cleaned it up a bit, but did not touch anything. I went back down and ask the police, the mayor, the mosque, even KFOR, for permission to excavate.

Shaip remembered that his father was peeling apples with a knife when the *četniks* took him away. He remembered how he was dressed. We found the knife, it was like new, only the handle was a little rusty, and the buttons of the jacket my grandfather was wearing. I had studied medicine and could immediately see that the way the bones were arranged in the grave confirmed the story of the killing. We reburied them in Pristina. I gave Ram's buttons to his children.

Why were they killed? Perhaps because they were good farmers, had lots of animals, milk, cheese, bread, and they were tough. They were killed because if the toughest were killed, all the others would run away, which they did. These killings had a purpose. All those villages, near the border, are empty. When there are no people, borders are not safe.

My father was happy when I found my mother's father, but disappointed he still had nothing from his father. He was an orphan all his life. My grandfather could have stayed home with his family, but he took the decision to run away. Maybe he wanted to avenge his brothers. Maybe somebody got hurt by him, someone from a family whose name we have never heard. One makes a decision, and then life takes him here and there.