

INTERVIEW WITH RAMIZ KELMENDI

Pristina | 12 June and 10 July 2014

Duration: 33 minutes

Present:

1. Ramiz Kelmendi (Speaker)
2. Anna Di Lellio (Interviewer)
3. Donjeta Berisha (Interviewer/Camera)
4. Jeta Rexha (Interviewer)
5. Migjen Kelmendi (Interviewer)

Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:

() - emotional communication

{ } - the speaker explains something using gestures

Other transcription conventions:

[] - addition to the text to facilitate comprehension

Footnotes are editorial additions to provide information on localities, names, or expressions

[The interview was edited by Migjen Kelmendi]

Jeta Rexha: Can you tell us something about your childhood?

Ramiz Kelmendi: Like the childhood of my entire generation, it was not a childhood to be much desired. There was much poverty, we were oppressed and trampled upon as well as neglected. I was born and was reared in Peja, but my origins are from Rugova, both my father and mother came from there and I am proud of it. But all I can say is that nevertheless I cannot not be happy with the life I had. Also in my childhood, I had the good luck that I had a father, who was very well off economically. He had a shop of his own. He reared six sons and two daughters, my father and my mother had eight children. All eight went to school, and this is a source of pride for my father and my mother because they were not educated. That was when Albanian children almost did not go to school at all. And if they went to school, they went to *mejtepe*,¹ there were religious school called *mejtepe*. But with time, with time of course, reading books, having contacts...

We had the good luck, my generation and I had the good luck that in the time after 1941, Albania came, Greater Albania that won us some freedom. Books from Albania arrived. We began to be educated with those books that arrived. More than school itself, books educated me. I had that natural tendency, that love for reading books which cannot be explained for the reason that both my father and my mother did not go to school, not even a single day. I was... I loved books since I was a child. And I had one of my first inspirations when I read Albanian books, it was *Gremina e dashurisë (The Abyss of Love)* by Mustafa Greblleshi,² and from then, whatever I could find from books in the library, we had two libraries in Peja. I bought and read all the books that came from Albania. I am talking about the period '41-'44. And reading books made me who I am.

¹ Primary parochial school for Muslim children

² Mustafa Greblleshi (1922-1986) was an Albanian writer, poet and translator. *Gremina e Dashurië* was first published by *Rilindja* in 1968.

I loved reading books, I slowly, slowly began also to write. I began to scribble, I published my first book, *Vija e vragë* (*Lines and Scars*), then, in this order, *Shtatë persona ndjekin autorin* (*Seven Characters Follow the Author*). I don't know, I don't know how many books I published, many. And I collaborated with one journal, it was *Zëri i Rinisë* (*The Voice of the Youth*), we began as students, we began in Belgrade to publish the journal *Zëri i Rinisë*. I wrote there, I was the editor, and from there, this ambition and this desire to become a journalist began. After that, *Rilindja* took me and I worked in the newspaper *Rilindja*, I wrote for many years. Finally, they also appointed me director of the publishing house *Rilindja*. I began to publish also books and I became the director, I mean, here the Committee decided our fate.

With regards to literature and journalism, I also dealt with the theatre, and indeed for four years I was the director of the Regional Theatre, they made me director of the Theatre. And in the Theater I opened two halls, the Theatre then had two halls, the Theater of Migjen, where poetry was read, and *Kabareu Satirik* [The Satirical Cabaret], as I named it - *Kabareu Satirik*, where literary themes were read and discussed.

I remember that I wrote the first story in my life, *Barka e peshkatarit* (The Fisherman's Boat). I was in Ulqin, I had an adventure, we can say a youth adventure (smiles), with a woman from Ulqin, and she inspired me, not only to write my first story, *Barka e peshkatarit*, that I had the inspiration from her, but also to write literature, because after that I wrote, I wrote *Letra nga Ulqin* [Letter from Ulqin]. Ulqin made me a writer, to tell you the truth.

(Smiles) I have one episode from the time of the war, when the Italian were here, the Italian officers who came, who occupied [us] together with the Germans. But the Italian stayed there for the reason that Albanian families did not accept the Italian officers in their homes because of religion and because... I don't know, conservatism. All the Italian officers lived with women of Serbian and Montenegrin families in Peja. We had many Serbs and Montenegrins in Peja. And the Italian officers, they were in Peja with Serbian families for the whole occupation. And now, while they lived with Serbian families, of course in Serbian families there were also desirable girls. And with time indeed, while they lived together, these Italian officers with Serbian women who were our neighbors, because in Peja there were many Serbs and Montenegrins, especially Montenegrins... we had two or three market days, market day is a day of trade in Peja, Saturday, and for example Mustafa Kruja came. Mustafa Kruja was at the time the Prime Minister and a writer, but also a great authority and he came to visit Peja. He was Prime Minister. And when he arrived we would shout, "Kruja Kruja Kruja" {slaps his hands, improvises shouts}. But that day, it happened in the morning, "Kruja Kruja!" and in the afternoon "Kruju Kruju"³ (laughs). Why? The Italian officers lived with Serbian families, and no Albanian family had Italian officers living with them, because we supposedly had a religion that forbade us.

³ In Albanian: "Itch! Itch!"

Donjeta Berisha: Why did you decide to study in Belgrade?

Ramiz Kelmendi: Well, because the department of Albanian Language and Literature was in Belgrade, there was the Chair of Albanian Language and Literature, with Professor Vojslav Dančetović and with two assistants, Idriz Ajeti and Anton Çetta. And I registered in that department, it was called Albanian Language and Literature and I did my studies with Vojslav Dančetović in Belgrade, he was the Chair, but also Idriz Ajeti and Anton Çetta were professors. And there I completed my studies in Albanian Language and Literature, four years.

Donjeta Berisha: And afterwards you came back to Kosovo?

Ramiz Kelmendi: Later, I returned to *Rilindja*, because *Rilindja* gave me the scholarship, I wrote, I was a journalist. So, *Rilindja* gave me the scholarship, and took me on as soon as I returned and I worked ten years, I worked as editor of *Rilindja*, as journalist. I am among the oldest journalists in Kosovo.

Donjeta Berisha: How was life in Belgrade?

Ramiz Kelmendi: How to put it...student life - student life. It is more interesting that we were given the chance, we were given the chance, I loved Albanian language and literature, we were given the chance that the Chair of Albanian Language and Literature was established in the middle of Belgrade. I am indebted to this Chair that I was oriented toward Albanian literature and language, because I was oriented toward something completely different, and in that department we had a very rich library of Albanian books, which Vojslav Dančetović, the Chair, had brought from Tirana. But later we also published, we published *Zëri i Rinisë* in Belgrade. At one time there was this journal, we called it *Zëri i Rinisë*, and on the board of editors there was Gjon Shiroka, Musa Murtezai, the editor in chief Murat Morina, Rexhep Surroi and I. And we began to publish, we began to publish in Belgrade the magazine *Zëri i Rinisë*. In fact, I began journalism and when I completed my studies, that *Rilindja* had given me a fellowship, and I returned to *Rilindja*, I became a reporter at large, as they say, a reporter at large, I mean, a reporter who wrote freely about different subjects, and not according to a format. And from there, as they say, from that time, I became a professional journalist.

In 1945, this means I was 15 years old because I was born in 1930, I had a terrifically big love for the fatherland, for Albania. I loved Albania so much, that a group of us students, but now we have a known name, we formed an anti-Yugoslav, an anti-Serb group, an Albanian group who was for the unification of Kosovo with Albania and we loved Albania. This was in 1945, when I was 15, and we formed a group, an organization that could be considered illegal, some five-six friends. It seems that one of those who was in our group betrayed us, and we were sent to prison. I was sent to prison at the age of 15. The UDBa of Peja sent me to prison, with my friends. And they kept us in the prison of Peja, later Prizren, which was the

main center of Kosovo back then, and they took us to Prizren. In Prizren they linked us to the group of Marie Shllaku.⁴ Marie Shllaku was a heroine from Shkodra who lived in Kosovo and worked in Kosovo and fought in Kosovo with guns, a courageous woman - I wrote the book, *Shqipëria e Marie Shllakut* [*Marie Shllaku's Albania*] - they linked us to Marie Shllaku, they took us to a public trial in Prizren.

We were five-six friends who had published an anti-Communist, anti-Serb magazine, and they put us in prison. Prizren was the main center of Kosovo, they took us to the Palace of Culture, to a public trial. The prosecutor was Ali Shukriu, he judged us, sentenced us, in our group there was Marie Shllaku, but also Bernard Llupi, a priest from Peja, Gjergj Martini from Shkodra, and Kolë Parubi, and also our Albanian language teacher.

We were imprisoned, these four, whose leader was Marie Shllaku, a woman about whom I wrote a book, *Shqipëria e Marie Shllakut* [*Marie Shllaku's Albania*]. Marie Shllaku, Bernard Llupi, Kolë Parubi, Albanian language teacher, and Gjergj Martini, were executed. Ali Shukriu sentenced them, and we were very young, we were 15, I was 15 and we were given one year in prison.

Donjeta Berisha: In which prison did you spend time, served your sentence?

Ramiz Kelmendi: In the prison of Prizren. I always had this stigma {hits the palm with his fist} as long as there was Communism, as long as there was Yugoslavia. I had that stigma {hits the palm with his fist} because I am a political prisoner, and I am a nationalist, because of course I loved Albania.

Donjeta Berisha: Did this influence you in your work when you got out of prison?

Ramiz Kelmendi: It had a great influence.

Donjeta Berisha: What were the consequences?

Ramiz Kelmendi: Well, the consequences, they had a very bad attitude towards me. They considered me a nationalist, which meant an enemy of Serbia, of Yugoslavia, and of Communism. And I really was an enemy of Communism and an enemy of Serbia and I had problems. However, what saved me, the pen saved me.

My father was a merchant, what they called *ratni bogataš*, I mean, a war profiteer. And Serbs considered me and a group of friends, who made the magazine *Drita e lirisë* [Light of Freedom] an anti-Communist, anti-Serb magazine, nationalist.

⁴ Marie Shllaku was an Albanian nationalist and political activist, involved in the resistance against the Communist partisans. She was executed by a firing squad in 1946 after a 13-day mock-trial.

Donjeta Berisha: Later you applied for a scholarship. What scholarship did you apply for, that you were rejected?

Ramiz Kelmendi: Yes, I applied for a scholarship to study in Belgrade, they did not give it to me and I began to cry. My father found me in front of the door crying. “What’s wrong son?” my father worked with horses, brought the mail in Peja, brought it from the station and he did it to support eight children, six sons and two daughters. I said, “I am crying, dad, because they did not give me the scholarship.” He said, “What haven’t they given you?” because my father did not know what a scholarship was. But I said, “They did not give me a scholarship.” “What did you say?” he said, I said, “Yes, they did not give me money to study!” “Fine,” he said, “this is why you’re crying for?” He was...he worked with horses, and he slapped the horses, the two horses, “I will sell the horses, I will sell the house, and you will go to school.” And my father sent me to study.

My father was *radni bogataš*, as they called it, a war profiteer, he was a merchant. And they sent him to jail, my father, UDBa sent him to jail. They considered the whole family enemy, because they were against the Communists. And when I began to work they asked for my salary, they did not give me a salary because they said I was the son of an enemy of the people. They sent my father to jail as a war profiteer, he was in trade.

Donjeta Berisha: For how many years was he in jail? For how long they kept him in jail?

Ramiz Kelmendi: They took him there... in fact he was kept in jail for almost one year, they took him also to Niš. They sentenced him to jail, and they took all his property. He was in trade. And they sentenced him, my father, one year.

But with us there was also Isa Çavolli, our teacher, a professor. And the idea or the vision of Ali Shukriu, who sentenced us and was our prosecutor, was that all our misdeeds, of those who were 15 years old, Viktor Gashi, Kamber Pajaziti, Ramiz Kelmendi... they attributed the misdeeds to Isa Çavolli because their goal was to execute him. But Isa Çavolli, I cannot say he played any role, but it seemed like they were dealing with children, because I was 15, and they wanted to leave all the guilt with Isa Çavolli because it was illogical to sentence us with execution, as was the plan of Ali Shukriu and UDBa at the time, to executed as many enemies of the people as possible, they called them Ballistas.⁵ They wanted Isa Çavolli

⁵ The Ballistas were members of the Albanian *Balli Kombëtar* movement, headed by Midhat Frashëri, and supported the unification of Albanian inhabited lands. After a failed attempt to join forces with the partisans in 1943, *Balli Kombëtar* continued to fight both the occupiers and the Communist resistance.

to take all the blame because it was incomprehensible that for example, children such as Viktor Gashi, Osman Basha, Ramiz Kelmendi would be sentenced to death...

They sentenced to death, by firing squad, Marie Shllaku, Bernard Llupi, Kolë Parubi, and Gjergj Martini. Gjergj Martini was a teacher in Gjakova from Shodra as well, but Marie Shllaku, she was the person who was attacked the most and the person who almost took all the responsibility for the group that was anti-Communist, anti-Serbian.

For example, I remember a detail that I want to tell you, Ali Shukriu... I was being accused of having made, of having published an anti-Communist, anti-Serbian magazine, and when time came they wanted to throw this magazine, the publication of this magazine, upon Isa Çavolli, the father of Liliana Çavolli,⁶ so they could execute him. And Ali Shukriu could not believe that I, Shefqet Kelmendi and the rest, children, had published the magazine and knew how to write. For example, they asked me, "Who wrote this?" "I wrote it." He said, "I went to school for twenty years, and I have not written two articles, and you did it!" I said, "Comrade prosecutor, if you don't believe that I have written this, bring me a piece of paper." The public trial was in the Palace of Culture of Prizren. I said, "Bring me a piece of paper and I will write." "I," he said, "I went to school for twenty years and did not write this, you did!" (smiles). I said, "Are you convinced that I can write or I cannot write?" "Sit down," he said, "on the bench of the donkeys, you fool!"

Migjen Kelmendi: Did he curse at you?

Ramiz Kelmendi: Yes, yes, "On the benches of the donkeys, you fool!" At the same time that I was in the UDBa prison here, my father was in prison in the Kulla e Sheremetit. At the time, there were two prisons of the UDBa police. One, was in the Academy of Painting...of Arts in Peja, and the other was the prison of Sheremet, of the Kulla of Sheremet, it was called like this. My father was in the prison of the Kulla of Sheremet and I was in the UDBa prison here.

Yes, we were all Albanian, whether from Kosovo, or Macedonia, who studied at the Department of Albanian Language and Literature of Dančetočić. You may ask why was a Department of Albanian Language and Literature in the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade opened. Only to settle someone in a position? Vojslav Dančetočić who came from Tirana. Vojslav Dančetočić is, he lived a long time in Tirana and I don't know, he did a lot of work there. Both for the dictionary and the language, so much so that when they brought him [back], they brought him as the head of the chair... he opened the department of Albanian Language and Literature and took Idriz Ajeti and Anton Çetta as his assistants. And we...I loved Albanian language and literature, without hesitation I registered immediately, together with some colleagues, friends of mine.

⁶ Popular singer.

We did, we organized a Literary Club, and we had, we students had a literary hour every week in the department of Albanian Language and Literature. And the department of Albanian Language and Literature was a stimulus, an open door, how to say, as ...an organizer of a very pro-Albanian work. Where did we get it from, and my [intellectual] nourishment, for example, where did it come from? I did not name my second son after Migjen, Visar, by chance. Why? The chair of the department of Albanian Language and Literature, Dančetović, had brought from Tirana a very rich library. In fact I learned a lot and from that library that Dančetović brought from Tirana to the department of Albanian Language and Literature in the Yugoslav, Serb faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, because I forgot what I learned in school.

He brought us *Visaret e kombit* [*Treasures of the Nation*],⁷ which was a collection, a collection how to say, a library with the title *Visaret e kombit*. In that series of volumes with the common title *Visaret e Kombit* there was the folk literature and I liked the words treasures of the nation, treasure, treasures of the nation, it means wealth of the nation. I did not know what the word treasure means, later I thought and named my son, which you here did not know, I named my second son after Migjen, because I had an idol, I had a very great and beloved poet, more than Naim [Frashëri] and whomever I say...We did not have then Filip Shiroka and we did not have writers. I had Migjen.⁸

On 25 May 1955, I was 25, in the morning of 25 May, in that department, in the classes of the department where was the Albanian Language and Literature Chair, in the Philosophy Faculty of Belgrade, I was sitting with two women students from Gjakova. And not much later, while we were reading and conversing, what do I know, the door opened and two dour, dirty faces, said, “Ramiz Kelmendi?” I said, “Here.” “Come immediately with us.” They took me by the arms, they dragged me down, the department of Languages was on the fourth floor of the Philosophy Faculty in Belgrade. They dragged me down and down to the *barica* - the car of the Serbian police was called *barica*, and I once wrote some black humor, I wrote [about this] and published it - they put me inside, in single file and they closed the door. However, the partition of those drivers... drivers...those UDBa who were taking me to jail, was open and they talked. And now, I had a black humor and published it. They shoved me all by myself [in the car] and locked me up. However, the window of the drivers... drivers... of those UDBa people who imprisoned me was open and they were talking. And now - I did some black humor, I published it somewhere - they are taking me to prison, they’re imprisoning me and they talk all the time among themselves, “Have you been to the market today? How much for the peppers? How much for the cucumbers?” And I wrote it and made some irony, black humor, that I was going to jail and they talked about ordinary things, how much for the peppers... what was [in the market] and what wasn’t.

⁷ *Visaret e Kombit* is a series of publications collecting for the first time Albanian folklore, proverbs and hero songs. The first issue was published in Tirana in 1937 by the Franciscan monks Bernardin Palaj and Donat Kurti.

⁸ Millosh Gjergj Nikolla (1911-1938), known as Migjeni, a well-known poet and writer born in Shkodra.

When they put me in a [room], it was a large room with a floor like this one {shows it with his hands}, next, the floor had buckled, and they put me in a room where I was not alone, there were also about ten others. Later I understood who [was there], a famous philosopher, Dada, you know him, you must know him {addresses Migjen}.

Migjen Kelmendi: He is Dada, the painter.

Ramiz Kelmendi: The painter Dada, yes. He was a painter, but also a philosopher, Dada, and many others. I mean, I did not know why I was being arrested, what had happened there. The reason, today Khrushchev and Bulganin are coming to Belgrade to visit comrade Tito after the Tito's dispute with the Soviet Union. And when we say...why? ... because the article [of the penal code] was the same, as a [random] guy, a prose-writer, a philosopher, Ramiz, an Albanian. Why were they keeping us in custody? In case we would kill Khrushchev. We were dangerous because UDBa considered us enemies.

And in Belgrade we published the magazine *Zeri i Rinisë*. On the board of editors there was the editor in chief Gjon Shiroka, and the editors were Rexhai Surroi, Murat Morina and Ramiz Kelmendi. And we began to publish it at Marshalla Tita 24, on the fourth floor, they gave us an office, and we began to publish the magazine *Zëri i Rinisë*...

Migjen Kelmendi: *Zani!*⁹

Ramiz Kelmendi: *Zani i Rinisë*, of course!

Migjen Kelmendi: Was that in Gheg?

Ramiz Kelmendi: Yes, it is Gheg. This is not literary language. We're talking about 1955. We published some issues of *Zëri i Rinisë* in Belgrade.

Albania played football with Yugoslavia. I was very good friend with Ramadan Vraniqi and even today I have to thank him, although he's deceased. I, with Ali Shala, Veli Vraniqi, under the lead of Ramadan Vraniqi, he was my head at *Zani i Rinisë*, he made it possible for us to go where the football match

⁹ *Zëri* means voice in *Tosk* and Standard Albanian, while in *Gheg*, a variant that is prevalently used in Kosovo and northern Albania it would be pronounced and written as *zani*. The pronunciation is also a question of politics since there was no singular literary standard and both variants were used in print until 1972. It was only then that a standard Albanian language was decided at the Albanian Orthography Congress with the participation of representatives from Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and elsewhere. The standard (which is still used today) favored the *Tosk* variant over *Gheg*, but was accepted as a device that confirmed a singular Albanian national identity.

Albania-Yugoslavia took place. Ramadan was the head of the Football League of Yugoslavia but also the head of *Zëri*, but we were also friends. And I had the chance, for the first time in my life, to see the fatherland and with great pleasure, with great joy, we boarded the plane. He secured for us, I mean Ramadan, made it possible for us to go to Albania. It was my ideal, like going to Qaba [Kaaba], when he went to Qaba my father was not as happy as I was going to Albania. We boarded the plane and arrived above the airport of Tirana.

They kept the plane [on holding pattern] for some minutes over the airport in Tirana and it was not descending. And I almost began to hit my head {hits his head}, I was saying, “Did God write that I would go to the airport of Tirana and not land because of...I don’t know, weather conditions?” And the plane went around for ten-fifteen minutes over the airport of Tirana until we landed, and got out. And what did I see? Unfortunately, I should not say it, but I was disappointed with many things. I did not see what I expected, what I dreamt of. Not only did I not see that, but I felt very, very disappointed with what I was seeing. I did not see the Albania I imagined in my head, that I had idolized, that I had as a Qaba. For me Albania was Qaba, but I did not see anything I liked. I especially did not like...anyway I went to Dajti, they took us to the hotel Dajti, everything was organized. I went with the football players and was with Veli Vraniqi, he entertained us with jokes. They took us to Dajti, the first thing he said when we entered, “Careful with what you say, that everything is...”

Migjen Kelmendi: Recorded!

Ramiz Kelmendi: “Everything is recorded. Everything is recorded, bugged. Careful with what you say!” Second, I had, I had known even earlier that Albania was an Enverist Communist system, it was as they say...a dictatorship, not of the proletariat, but a “shit-letariat” as everywhere else in Eastern Europe. And I was prepared to what expected me in Albania. Of course I loved Albania, but I did not love Enver Hoxha, I never liked him, and I did not like him then, when I went.

They took us to Dajti, they put us there, but we were never alone, there was always someone who followed us, later I noticed that. God willed me to be anxious, I wanted to see Tirana as much as I could, and I began to wander in Tirana, through bookshops, to the Palace of Culture, I had.... And I always noticed that I had one or two {counts with fingers}, I always had someone behind. Thus, when I went to cut my hair, because in the hotel Dajti there was a barber, a *rrojtar*¹⁰ and when I went to cut my hair at this *rrojtar*, I saw that the man who always followed me also came to the barber who was in Dajti, the hotel Dajti. I mean, he was following me step by step. They recorded me, I mean, as they told me later, they told me when we were friends that, “You were under surveillance.” They told me, “You were followed in every step.” But I said, “You know that indeed in Kosovo they think that I am all for Albania, that maybe I am an Albanian spy.” “Yes,” he said,” but any of you who comes here, and who does not have written here

¹⁰ Old Albanian word for barber.

{touches his forehead} that you are a patriot, any of you was a spy sent by UDBa to come and spy on Tirana, Albania, against Albania.” They took me, it was me, Ali Shala {counts with fingers} and Veli Vraniqi.

Later I also went to get books, I brought books from Albania, I was the director of the publishing house. I brought books, brought calendars and *distinktiva* [badges], I learned the word *distinktiva*, we called those badges *značka*,¹¹ and thus we called them in “Albanian” {makes quotes with hands}.

Migjen Kelmendi: How many times did you go to Albania, dad?

Ramiz Kelmendi: Fifteen times.

Migjen Kelmendi: And?

Ramiz Kelmendi: And for 15 times, for how many times I went there, I lied. I lied to anyone who asked me, because they, when I returned from Albania...I was privileged, because I went some times, 15 times I went to Albania in the auspice of Ymer Pula, whom I took with me and today is dead, also Ramadan Vraniqi. And for how many times I went, when I got back, I always lied about how Albania was, because they loved it so much, they smelled me {he sniffs his shoulder} to smell the wind of Albania {he touches his shoulder}, because you know, all Kosovo, all Kosovars are in love with Albania, Albania is our fatherland.

And when I returned from Albania, all the friends came to my home, “Now tell us your impressions, and ...how did you see Albania, how is Albania.” Of course I always lied, it was not the true Albania the one I talked about.

I was very disappointed about Albania at the time of Enver, those fifteen times I went, I did not expect that. I dreamt of Albanian like the imams dream of Qaba. I dreamt something infallible and adored it as something that you see once in a lifetime, and never again. From the first day I went, from the first time, and all the other times that I went, I felt bad for that Albania. It did not... the love for the fatherland as fatherland did not suffer, but what completely suffered is the love for that fatherland that was Communist. And I was against Communism because Communism put me in jail in Peja. I was in prison, an anti-Communist. All the rest... except Albania as an idea, Albania as a temple, an adored temple, I did not find, because I found a great disappointment.

¹¹ Serbian word for badge.