

INTERVIEW WITH SHAQIR GASHI

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Duration: 127 minutes

Present:

1. Shaqir Gashi (Speaker)
2. Anna Di Lellio (Interviewer)
3. Sylejman Gashi (Interviewer)
4. Qazim Doda (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

Childhood

Shaqir Gashi: My name is Shaqir Gashi, I was born in the village of Vojnik. Vojnik belongs to [the region of] Drenica, and is surrounded by other villages such as Broja, Kopiliq, Turiçevc, Kllodarnica and Izvica. I was born in 1936, my mother used to tell me that I was born, [that] I was born when we shook the big walnut tree, there used to be a huge walnut tree over there in our garden and she said it must have been the end of September 1936.

Sulejman Gashi: What do you remember best from your childhood?

Shaqir Gashi: I remember many things from my childhood, if I haven't forgotten them, many things, you know. For instance, I belong to the generation immediately after the Second World War, I remember the wars of Drenica. I remember... not all, but I remember that the men in those days were saying that a big war was taking place in Drenica, "Shaban Pollluzha is fighting," "Shaban Kotorri is fighting," everyone was engaged in the War of Drenica. I remember that in the villages beyond the village of Vojnik, for instance Tisa, there was a big snow storm, I remember as if it were today, the pictures of those fighting in those days, Shaban Polluzha's fighters were fighting.

Sulejman Gashi: So, your family, what was it like in the village? Was it a big family with lots of land? About your father...

Shaqir Gashi: My family was very well known. We had an *oda*¹ where all men came... I can say, from all Drenica, and beyond Drenica. We had wealth at that time and my father was very well known... he had participated in the First World War. He was a soldier in the Second [speaker's correction of transcripts: First] World War for almost 13 or 14 years, as he told about the hardship of the war there. And then, when he came back we started having a life, as my father used to tell me. We use to have tens of hectares of land, we were mostly farming, and we had farm animals, we had sheep and goats and cows and horses. For instance, my uncle who taught me to smoke cigarettes with him (laughs), used to have a horse.

¹ Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.

I mean, there was a great happiness back then. The horse, for instance, when we were invited to weddings during which the horse played a role when we went to get the bride, I remember all these things as if they were [happening] today.

Sulejman Gashi: When did you start school?

Shaqir Gashi: I started going to school, most certainly I started very late because they did not know then after the Second [World] War, I was most likely ten, twelve or thirteen years old, which, I don't remember. I started going to the primary school in Turiçevc, my first teacher was Ahmet Meha, Muhamet Meha and afterwards some other teachers came, and it was a great happiness. I used to have a bag with books, pencils, it was a great happiness. I first learned language there. I learned the [alphabet] letters first for instance. It was a great happiness... I will never forget.

Interviewer: You certainly remember, before you went to school, you had animals, sheep, cattle... Were you a shepherd? Do you remember?

Shaqir Gashi: Ah, yes I was for a short period, because we had about fifty goats, sheep, and we would send them out to pasture in the mountains. And the greatest happiness for us shepherds at that time was when we brought the goats and sheep, in the morning we would tell them, we would tell them in the morning to bring [the livestock] to the other side. It was a great happiness. We had three to four dogs to guard our livestock, and it was very interesting.

I remember as if it were today, it was a huge deal... to have, for example, a great wealth. Our [fellow] villagers, they mainly did farming, they had goats, sheep, cows, we had buffalos. And so on, our wealth, that was our wealth for the most part. And of course with farming, the planting of wheat, of maze, of all those things that were needed to...

My father and all of us, we mainly did farming, animal farming as I said earlier, with goats, sheep, cows, horses, buffalos, and others, I remember. Primary school when I started was a great happiness as I said earlier, although we were late to start. People did not have much education, some people before me I'd heard had attended a school there, in which they learned in Serbian language, while we started in Albanian language. We received some books from Albania, I will never forget the great happiness at that time and so we would begin [reading] in shifts. So I finished primary school in Turiçevc.

And then afterwards there were some other issues, the opportunities, it wasn't easy because for us there was ... great poverty, because during that time they demanded a surplus, the so-called *višak*² as the Serbs called it. We had to give them everything, down to the egg, and the chicken that lays the egg, we had to bring to the government of that time.

² *Višak*, literally surplus, it refers to the farming products in excess of the quota assigned by the Yugoslav Federal economic planning to farmers cooperatives established in 1945 through a process of forced collectivization.

So, I remember our suffering too, our poverty, it started like that, poverty began immediately around '48, '49 according to my memory, I think the hardest year was 1950, I remember during that time, we children did not have food for two to three months. But I remember that we would make bread with sunflowers, just to survive, to live. At that time we had, I remember we had fifty goats... we had plenty of milk. We would take the corn kernels, we would get milk to wash it down... we'd mix in even the sunflowers to survive. So, that was a very difficult time, afterwards they took away our goats and at that time, I will never forget, we had many goats, a big number of goats. They brought them to Mitrovica and they, I don't know what they did with them, but they took all our goats and left us nearly crippled without property, without anything. We had to send [the government] the meat, we had to send oil, butter, chicken... anything that we had produced, produced in farming, had to be given to the state of that time.

Now, my memories of the village, as I said before, are the memories of the time when my village Vojnik had, as they used to say then, around one hundred households. But what is very interesting and it was like that, and I say this with confidence, like for example, that village had all of our *fis*,³ there were Gashi, Krasniqi, Hoti, Berisha, Thaçi, and all the others. But it is very interesting that there was never any trouble among them. For instance, when we would go farming to work our land, they had, they had the custom of getting together that was called *orët*.⁴ We'd gather in groups of twenty, thirty people. From thirty-forty people we'd go one day to one, another day to the other one, it was a great happiness, a great joy.

Now, for example, the men of that time would chat, they surely talked about the government, when they did not have trust in the Yugoslav state. After the Second World War, the elderly of that time always thought that they would not live long. For instance... there were some rules in our fields, when they were done, when we tilled the corn[field] as it was called [then], it was great fun. Now, for example, animal farming... when we went there with the shepherds, we had a tradition, we used to call it, *kulaç*.⁵ *Kulaç* was usually made sometime around *Shën Mitri*⁶ when we'd stop the animals' *mëngjezi*,⁷ which was sending the livestock to pasture for the day, and then it was... we would milk the sheep and prepare the milk [to use] sometime during the winter. It was a lot of fun, now for example, I would make *kulaç* today, Qazim would make it tomorrow, Hasan would make it the following day and so on, we all had fun, a great joy. For instance, [inc.] for about five to six weeks we would each go as a guest to each other's [house] with pies, chicken, with all the dishes we had, it was a great joy.

Now, for instance I remember also... for instance, as a shepherd since you asked earlier, we had some games, which we played and they were called *kliçkas*, *petas*, we had some... Now, this was most

³ *Fis* can be defined as a patrilineal descent group and an exogamous unit whose members used to own some property in common. Membership in a *fis* is based on a common mythical male ancestor

⁴ *Orët*, literally hours.

⁵ *Kulaç*, a hard round bread that is made of mixture of flour, water, salt and baking soda.

⁶ *Shën Mitri*, or *Shën Dhimitri* is a saint of the Orthodox Church and its day is the 26th of October to also mark the beginning of the autumn. It's the time when shepherds bring their livestock from mountains down to lower pastures.

⁷ *Mëngjezi*, literally breakfast, but here refers to grazing.

interesting, we had a hunting [game], when we'd go with those who were older than we youngsters, we would compete in hunting, for instance we called it a kestrel. A falcon would hover over us and would stay there, and when the bird wanted to get into the bushes somewhere, he would enter there and would get frightened. We would go and we would say to each other, "Leave it to me now," we would throw stones at it, they were some big birds. So it was some kind of a hobby, a lot of fun, it was interesting.

Now for instance, when that falcon, the kestrel as we called it, the falcon would take the bird it had caught itself and would take it to its nest, we would throw [stones] at it and say, "*Amanet*,⁸ come again!," "*Amanet*, come again!" Would you believe it that the falcon would immediately fly over us. It was so much fun that I can never forget it. And so on, I have many other things. How shall I tell you, for instance in other villages, the ones from our region mainly come to mind, people farmed more then than now. For instance, at the end of the entire summer, they would organize what we called the harvest suppers and it was a lot of fun. So, for instance fall took something, but it brought something else, so we would prepare for winter.

The biggest preparation for winter was to get wood for the winter, to get the cabbage and make sauerkraut, pickled peppers, and for the ones who could afford it, to cut an entire cow and smoke it. For instance, when the smoked beef was cut, it was possible to share it, we would invite our neighbors, it was enjoyable. Then, after we had our dinner, we would play *kapuças*.⁹ We would begin singing to each other. It was very enjoyable and I really can't forget this ever.

Youth

I have memories from the army, but before we became soldiers, as I said earlier, a wave of suffering, poverty, scarcity and other things hit us. Therefore, I nearly had to quit school completely and go look for a job in those Yugoslav enterprises. We would go and do manual labor, so they were exploiting us as they pleased. Then at some point I received a draft notice. I went as soldier, I served in the army in Skopje and Titov Veles, I remember the earthquake happening in Skopje... What year was that?

Sylejman Gashi: '63?

Shaqir Gashi: '63 (laughs), it was the year '63 and it was a huge catastrophe. I was a soldier then and I remember in detail what I will share with you here. When I was soldier there... they sent me to nursing school, so I was there for 13-14 months and I completed nursing school and became a rather good nurse and they even started to call me doctor. We would give injections and other things. And now as soldiers,

⁸ *Amanet* is literally the last will, but in the Albanian oral tradition it has a sacred value. In the game, the children yell at the falcon, jinxing it to come back.

⁹ *Kapuças* (literally hats), is a game played with a few hats, which are placed on the table or on a flat surface. Underneath one of the hats there's a ring or similar prized objects. The one who can guess where the object is, wins it.

the army was very interesting, as soldiers we didn't have all rights, but it was kind of different to be soldier there.

I will never forget, there was a gunpowder warehouse that I knew about in Titov Veles. And the captains of the army over there, they said, that this Gashi is partying around here in the Yugoslav army, "Let us send him to the watch, the so-called *straža*." And they sent me to be a watchman where the gunpowder warehouse was, where there were two directions, in one direction you could say, "Stop!" in the other, you could shoot, or do something. So, the soldiers feared that some guards or someone would come and murder you. I had never been a watchman, I didn't have any experience.

When... something bad happened, but it turned out to be good for me. Some donkeys had been tied there in Titov Veles, I heard the elderly saying, "Like the *Quprlija* donkeys"¹⁰ (laughs). As... I will never forget this. They [the donkeys] were tied tail to tail and so instead of saying, "Stop! [*Ndalo*]" I used the word "*Nalu!*"¹¹ again, "*Nalu!*" but the donkey did not stop. I started shooting my machine gun and I killed a donkey. So it was a big deal, all the soldiers said, "You killed the enemy," and they gave me ten days leave.

I will never forget it, in those ten days of leave I visited home, my father was ill, and he passed away that year. I remember being in the army was hard, it was very strict... but it was also an experience for people. When I finished my army service, they gave me a diploma which entitled me to practice nursing, medicine or... they used to call it *bolničar*¹² in those days. So immediately after I finished military service, I started working in Demir Kapija. In Demir Kapija, there were some five hundred Albanian workers, in Macedonia, in Demir Kapija, where the highway from Gevgelija – Demir Kapija – Gevgelija and Skopje was being built. So we were around, as I already said, around five hundred plus Albanians.

I remember a big detail, Sefë Mleqani¹³ and his son I will never forget, when we had a break he would sing patriotic songs, we would all stop and listen to him, I will never forget that happiness. And then, afterwards, after Demir Kapija, things got really difficult and I was transferred, sent to Mitrovica. An order came from Mitrovica somewhere there and they told me, "You have to go to Janjevo of Pristina." In Janjevo of Pristina again, some four to five hundred workers had been sent there, all of them to break stones there, and now I was made head nurse, I had a vehicle for emergency or if something else happened, a red cross {touches his arm where the cross used to be} with some ties, to check hygiene or what was happening there.

Once, not more than two months later, a colonel from Belgrade came and he saw some things... the tents where we were staying had not been cleaned properly and he said, "Who is responsible for this cleaning?" Someone said to him, "It's Gashi." And the colonel came, I will never forget and he said to me, "Why this

¹⁰ *Quprlija* was the old name of the rural area of Tito Veles, and it stood for any rural place in conversations among the elderly in Drenica [comment of the speaker].

¹¹ "Stop" in Gheg.

¹² *Bolničar*, Serbian word for paramedic.

¹³ Sefë Mleqani and his son were rhapsodes.

[inc.]?” and he told me, “Stand to attention!” I told him, “Look...” I had to address him as comrade. “Comrade colonel,” I told him, “I have completed military service, I don’t need to stand to attention.” He said, “You have a thick head. Where are you from?” he asked me. At that time Drenica people, to tell you the truth, often we could not tell we were from Drenica, we were hiding [that], because Drenica was sticking a needle in the eye of the UDB-ash’s,¹⁴ the regime of those days, so I said, “I am from Mitrovica.” He said “Mitrovica, Mitrovica! But tell me, where are you from?” Then I told him, “I am from Srbica, or we used to call it Skenderaj.” “Ah...” he said, “You are from Drenica!” I said, “Yes, I am from Drenica.” He said, “Those of you from Drenica don’t like us.” I said, “You, comrade colonel, if you don’t like us, we have no reason to like you.” So he was upset by those words and he said, “I dismiss you immediately.” I said, “Right now!” And so I will never forget, it was fall and I handed in the furniture that I had as a nurse. I handed them in and I went to Mitrovica, got discharged from duty and went to the village of Vojnik.

From the village of Vojnik, then I didn’t know where to go afterwards. Always, while we were in Demir Kapija, we would secretly listen to the Voice of America. It was our dream, but it was uncertain how could we get to America, but it did come true at some point. That’s a story that... I’ll tell you later, so I decided to take that road. In order to take that road, first you had to take some other roads. For example, during that time in Kosovo they did not issue passports, they did not issue anything, they kept people inside. They wouldn’t let you go abroad, but I decided to go to Montenegro. And I went to Montenegro and did some other jobs. Then from there I learned how I could get to the United States of America.

It is very interesting, in Ulqin, in Anamal, in Krajina, in the areas of *Malësi e Madhe*,¹⁵ there were very good people, they were good Albanians and I remember poor people, they too, were trying to learn the [Albanian] language. There used to be a bridge there, which they called the *Ura e Gurit*, [Stone Bridge] from the *Ura e Gurit* to Ulqin they didn’t know Serbian well, just Albanian, but they were trying to mix Albanian and Serbian together. So, I remember that fall when I left Ulqin, it must have been ‘68. I will never forget going to the United States of America, the only person who knew I was going to the United States of America was Professor Kajtaz Fazlija.

He came from Kosovo and he saw me off, I will never forget, we were in Tivar [today’s Bar]. Now, I will stop for a bit on Tivar, I remember some other details. I would share with you another detail, for example in Tivar, you know that the Tivar Massacre¹⁶ happened there. As I said earlier, I got acquainted with the villagers from the surrounding areas of Tivar, I will never forget there was a village called Peçurice, another village was Zaljev. And I got acquainted with a guy they called Bajram Sulović, because they were all

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

¹⁵ *Malësi e Madhe*, (literally Great Highlands) is a region largely inhabited by Albanian speaking people, which lies to the East of Podgorica in modern day Montenegro, along the Lake of Shkodra in modern day Albania, next to Kosovo.

¹⁶ Also known as the massacre of Tivar, was the mass killing of Albanian recruits from Kosovo by Yugoslav partisan forces in 1945.

named with “*vić*,”¹⁷ it’s interesting because in that village there were Bosniaks, Turks or Albanians, but they all somehow spoke the same language. And I became friends with him and he had one hundred sheep to look after. One day he told me in Serbian, “My son, I want to tell you something.” I told him, “Please!” He said, “When the Tivar Massacre happened, they ordered us to tie up our dogs,” he said, “we had a very good dog, we tied it up. We were giving it food under the granary, on the fifteenth day there was no sign of the dog.” And he said, “One day we decided to go and check on the dog. When we checked under the granary, the dog was folded over like this {shows with hands}, only his bones were left. Next to the dog there was a man, a man from the war, so, from the Tivar Massacre who had eaten the dog’s food.” And the old man was telling me then, he said, “I didn’t know what to do, I took the man out with a rake, I placed him in front and I called the police. When I called the police...” the old man at the time had a walking stick like this {shows with hands} and was a sheep shepherd, and he said, “This is where I called the police, this is where they shot him.” It was very painful!

When I was in Tivar and Sutomore, we were like manual workers there. We were some of the few Albanians who were employed in the construction between Tivar and Ulqin. We were working on the road that was being built. We were about fifty to sixty Albanians. At some points we Albanians, as is customary to us, would burst into song and sang different songs. I remember a very interesting detail, there was a Montenegrin woman looking after two cows near the Adriatic Sea in Tivar and she said, “Check this out, how are you singing! How can you sing this song that I remember. There used to be more white *plisa*¹⁸ here by the sea, than there are seagulls here today.” We got worried. You know she was relating it to the Tivar Massacre. We all knew what massacre happened there. We knew people from the village, we knew Maksut Hasani who was there and survived by escaping through Kraja, on the mountain side, someone saved him.

I became friends with Sulo Bajramović from the village of Pečurice, he had around one hundred sheep, because they mostly held sheep. So one day he was telling me about an event related to the Tivar Massacre. He was telling me that, “During the time that the massacre happened, we were ordered to tie up our dogs.” “During that time,” he said, “I had shepherd dogs to guard my sheep, but I also had one big dog. And we had to tie it, we took the dog and we tied it, we would usually bring food for the dog under the granary. The dog was tied for about 15 days... that was the reason,” as the old man said, because there were many bodies of murdered people on the street, they were slaughtered, therefore to keep it unknown, to keep it quiet. And he told me, he said, “One day I thought about the dog and I wanted to go and see how the dog was doing.” When he leaned over to look under the granary, he saw the dog was just bones. And the old man was telling about the time, he took a rake and he took out the dog, but there was another man under there, an Albanian, most likely a Kosovar Albanian who had survived the massacre, he

¹⁷ Family name affix in Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Montenegrin, meaning “son of.” Arbitrarily the affix has been applied to Albanian family names.

¹⁸ White traditional Albanian hat, cap made of wool that differs from region to region.

had been eating the dog's food. So, he was telling me and he said, "The man just left the bones. I took the rake and I took him out from under the granary and I immediately called the police. The police came, I told them this and that, and could they help this man?" He said, "Instead of saving him, they shot him five times. Here, here [he points where they shot him] then they buried him!"

My dream and the dream of several of my friends back then was how to leave and get to America. I remember, I am repeating again, I was prepared to get out, as I said earlier we had some friends from Ulqin. And we started, there was some Fadil Çapriqi there, and a detail, there was the father of Richard Lukaj who is a great success now, he has a huge business, he is a great [national] activist and I sometimes take pride in the fact that he was the reason, because of his father and some other friends, that seven families got together and decided to leave via Italy. In order to get to Italy we had to get to the road to take a bus called *Raketa* [Rocket] and we went to Rijeka.

From Rijeka, we had a coffee there... but I will never forget that in Rijeka, for example in Kosovo, we used to say, "Comrade," [as in] "How are you, comrade?" We didn't use Sir. When I went to Rijeka, there was a Croat and I addressed him as "Comrade!" I will never forget that episode, he said, "I am not a comrade, we didn't herd cows together, I am a Sir [to you]!" So, it seemed to me that there was more freedom there in Croatia and in Rijeka. Then from there, we had a coffee and decided how to leave, which way to leave. We had several directions, we were seven families and we got through the border and got to Italy.

In Italy I was in a camp, it was called Patriçan, a place, a camp, a place where all the people who were preparing to leave were staying. I will never forget for example, at that time we didn't dare to say we are from Kosovo, because they would return us since allegedly Kosovars had more rights than in Albania, therefore we said we were from Albania. But I had declared that I was from Albania, even to this date I have documents from the village of Belaj in Shkodra where I've never been, and never knew, but they taught you what to say. And, I will never forget, there was a Croat with whom we'd taken the test. And now he told me, "Turn your back," I turned my back there and I knew Serbian pretty well and I answered his questions in Serbian. He said, "You are not from Albania, because you know Serbian very well." I told him, "Sir, I was ten years old when I left, I left Albania, in Yugoslavia they offered me Yugoslav citizenship, and I did not accept it." I said, "I... even a donkey could learn Serbian in ten years, never mind me!" And he told me, "Come one, get lost, I know who you are." (laughs).

Then from *Patriçan* we went to Capua, Caserta, near Naples. We stayed there for about nine months, and from there we continued to the United States of America. It was interesting that we did not have any information about coming to the United States of America. There were... I believe that during that time there was also one guy from Kosovo, from Rugova, whom in fact I had never seen. His name was Sadri, I never saw him again. And I was the only one from Kosovo.

Most of the emigrants during those times were Albanian *malësorë*,¹⁹ who had left with their families, and it was very interesting - I am going back a bit. For example, during those times the Albanians who would go to the Italian camps had to pay a large amount of money to get a passport and leave on the ferry from Tivar to Bari that was travelling to Italy, you had to pay. This was run by Montenegrins during those times, not only were they displacing Albanians but they were also making a profit for themselves because they were getting money. So now, we didn't have any information. There were three or four categories depending on whom you wanted to go with, where you wanted to go to. There I had... I met Mentor Çoku. He was a great patriot like Vasel Antoni and others.

And now, we got ready, we received our paperwork to go to the United States, we had some information that if you came to America, you had to have some weapons on you because there were gangsters, black people, and what do I know, "They will kill you, they will rob you, they will..." And now, in order to be protected, we decided each to bring a pistol (laughs), what we called a gun. To tell you the truth, I ended up in the middle of the Kennedy Airport with two guns. At the time, when I landed at Kennedy Airport, there was a guy, Nerim Kupi, he had a duty, he was in charge of accompanying any immigrant who came. And he comes, they signal to him that something was not right with me. And Nerim tells me, he says, "Gashi," since I knew him from before, from Italy, Nerim Kupi and I, we already knew each other, he was a good man, today he is most likely somewhere in Albania, and he tells me, "Give me the gun since I know you are from Drenica and you've brought a gun with you." I tell him, "Look, I can't because I've placed it in a very bad place. I've hidden it, I can't show it to you." Then the people who were checking for suspicious signs said, "Open your luggage!" When I opened my luggage there were some walnuts there. And they blame the walnuts and I entered the United States of America (laughs).

Then from the airport we went straight to the Bronx, to Arthur Avenue where most of the Albanians live today. In those days I had a friend named Lam Halili from Ulqin. He paid the rent for my apartment for about two or three months before my arrival, concerned that I might not find an apartment. And so we started, some people had come earlier, I used to know a guy, Riza, Riza Kraja... Riza Halili was from Kraja, we were introduced in Ulqin. He had come about one year or more before me. I was asking my friends where can I find, how can I find a job. But we were not prepared, we didn't know any English. And I will never forget, we began to leave the Bronx and come to Manhattan to walk. We would walk in the big streets.

Then at some point they told us that we should go to some agencies to find jobs. When I went to the agency to look for a job, the person asked, "What can you do?" I said, "I am a bricklayer, I was kind of a builder in Sutomore before." I wanted to tell him that I know how to do some work. Eh, now he understood that I was some sort of sculptor. "Ah," he said "we have work for you," he said, "come, we'll find you work." And he took me to a place where, when I got there, the employer who needed a worker understood that I was a sculptor, there were some headstones that had to be made. He told me, he

¹⁹ From Malësia, supra n. 15.

showed me the plan, but I couldn't understand anything and told him, "No, no, I don't know these things, I am a bricklayer." "Ah," he said "I'm sorry!" and he sent me to transport. Therefore, the first job that I had there, I found it hard, I even thought I had sinned against God by coming here. Had I returned...

Sylejman Gashi: What year did you come?

Shaqir Gashi: In '70, the beginning of 1970, '69 and '70. So it was hard. Where to find a job, what to do, we would walk, we didn't know where to find a job, there were jobs at that time, when my friend heard me, he said, "There's this guy Riza," whom I mentioned, the late [Riza], he died, he was a very good man from Kraja. He said, "He will find you a job," he worked as a cleaner. And I will never forget, he took me to work at the Rizzoli Bookstore, the well-known Rizzoli Bookstore on Fifth Avenue. But, his boss told him, "Take this employee, but he should not come early, and he should leave work earlier so he is not seen." So for almost six weeks I almost did nothing. In the end, we found out that his boss had lied because I wasn't registered anywhere to work.

So now I was deeply disappointed, and very concerned, what to do now? Now they were teaching me, "You will go to an address somewhere on Madison Avenue and 30th street," where there was a restaurant as well, it was very good, it was called Zana, I will never forget. So, I went there, but what could I say to that big boss. He said, "Tell him, 'Please, help me'." Would you believe that I wrote it on my hand {shows how he wrote it}, "Help me, please'." And I went there and told him, "Help me please!" I didn't understand a thing. He said, "But you are not registered. Now let's help you! So okay, what language do you speak?" I thought that I knew Serbian, I thought that Serbian and Russian are almost the same, you know... somewhat close. I said, "I know Russian, too." "Ah," he said "very well, because we have an engineer in the Lexington Hotel." Now, I tell you, in the Lexington Hotel there was, they say that Mid'hat Frashëri²⁰ died in that hotel, I found out later, and they sent me to him.

The engineer there was not Russian, but from Estonia. And I immediately went to him and said, "Do you speak Russian?" He felt insulted. He said, "Sir, I am not Russian. You are insulting me." I said, "Excuse me, but what are you?" He said, "I am Estonian. And you?" I said, "I am Albanian." "Okay, we will get along, but I am not Russian." He used to be a General of the Estonian army during those times, because Estonia almost left like... the whole state apparatus migrated to America because they never accepted the Russian occupation. To tell you the truth, he helped me a lot, he helped me a lot there. And I started working at the Lexington Hotel, and each day the Estonian taught me two or three English words, and that's how I learned.

One day, in the hotel where I was working, we were there, I was like a busboy and something had to be cleaned in the Lexington Hotel. I had a colleague there as well, a black man. When we had our break, he would buy the *New York Times* and read it, I couldn't understand a thing. And now, I was trying to tell my

²⁰ Mid'hat Frashëri (1880-1949), an Albanian diplomat, writer and politician. Son of Abdyl Frashëri, prominent nineteenth century Albanian politician, and nephew of Naim and Sami Frashëri. More importantly, the leader of *Balli Kombëtar*.

colleague, that black man, that I too know many languages, but I can't read this one, I don't understand it, I can read it, but I can't understand it. And he tells me, "What do you know?" I said, "I know, I speak many languages." "Which languages?" I said, "I speak Serbian, Croatian, Bulgarian, Italian, Russian." He took the *New York Times* like this and said, "Listen to me my friend. If you came to America, in America even God speaks English. If you don't know English, God won't answer your prayers." Now I said, "Oh, I must learn English as soon as possible." I worked for a while, I said it earlier all brothers²¹ were friends, we had been together during school and youth and I tell him to buy me *Rilindja*²² as soon as possible, so I could at least have something to read. So Kajtaz Fazlija bought me a [copy of] *Rilindja*, and one-by-one, day-in-and day-out, I read it and I was checking what was happening in Kosovo.

That way, then, afterwards, I started to learn the language and what do I know, so that I could look for other jobs. I went to an agency to look for a job, and he tells me... this was just before the Lexington [Hotel], and he tells me, "You are a delivery boy," with orders for example to deliver, when someone asks for their food to be sent to their home. I didn't know what a delivery boy was. I said, "I'll take the job." And I went somewhere near the Wall Street area, now I would never know the exact address. When I arrived, there was a Greek there or I don't know, and someone had ordered a bag and he brought it to me there. I am thinking, I am saying [to myself], "This must be a very good man!" I am saying, "He wants to feed me first, then find me a job to do." I ate everything in that delivery order. And now he points a finger at me, "Come, do the next delivery and give me the money." I said, "I don't have money, I ate it," (laughs) "What did you eat?" So, they fired me from the job, so that was very hard.

In the end, after I went to the Lexington [Hotel] and started working there, I started to learn English little by little. After seven, eight months, I saved a bunch of money, it was a good salary, and the Estonian general told me, "Now, I have another job for you." I said, "What kind of a job?" He said, "There is a position as a super. Would you go to work there? It's at the Estonian Consulate, would you like to go there? We like you a lot, and I want you to go and work there!"

So now, from the Bronx, after three, four, five months, I went to Manhattan and I became a super at the Estonian House, in that House of Estonia there. And now I was meeting a lot of friends, and others there. I remember one detail, for example Milovan Djilas²³ had visited that house, he had visited that house and left a book of memoirs in their library. Since no one lived there, I was the only one who had an apartment at the top. In fact, during that time even Kajtaz Fazlija came to visit me there, but I'll tell you about it later. So now I took the job, I didn't know the language, I knew the Serbo-Croatian language and I started

²¹ Brother, expression used among Albanians to depict those who belong to the same group, in this case a national group.

²² *Rilindja*, the first newspaper in Albanian language in Yugoslavia, initially printed in 1945 as a weekly newspaper.

²³ Milovan Djilas (1911-1995), was a Yugoslavian politician, author and dissident. Although he was a communist and had fought as a partisan, Djilas became one of the most vocal critics of the Yugoslav communist elite.

reading that book, what did Milovan Djilas' father say when they shot Isa Boletini.²⁴ It said, "They set up an ambush for him on the Podgorica Bridge. I said to my friends, 'I would like to catch Isa Boletini alive, don't kill him!' But my friends, out of fear," he said, "shot and killed him with a gun." However, he went quickly to find him alive and when he arrived, he said, "He said one word in Albanian, and it bothers me because I don't know what he said." It is very interesting.

For example, after that, when I became a super, while walking, while learning a little bit more, while walking on the street, I would go to a place on 50th street and Second Avenue, there was a pizza restaurant there called Dibra, owned by some guy named Beqir Previzi, and I entered and asked him, "Are you an Albanian?" "Yes!" "I envy you and your beautiful restaurant!" I said, "How much would you sell it to me for?" He said, "15 thousand dollars." I said, "But I don't have 15 thousand dollars." He asked, "How much do you have?" I said, "I have about five-six thousand dollars!" He said, "You give me those five-six thousand dollars, I will wait for the rest." So I made a deal with him on the spot, some agreement, and I became a restaurant owner. I took down the sign that said Dibra and being nostalgic, I called it Drenica, Drenica, you know, on 50th street, it wasn't far from the United Nations. So then when I named it Drenica, Albanians who emigrated during the Second World War and before the Second World War, started coming, for example Rexhep Krasniqi, Luan Gashi and Leka... what is Leka's name... Agim Leka and others, there was Sahit Kryeziu.

Yes, I remember, these are memories that I will never ever forget ... Luan Gashi. Luan Gashi you most likely know that he was a stern intellectual and anti-Yugoslav, anti all the things that were happening. He had supported *Balli Kombëtar*²⁵ with *Lidhja Kosovare*.²⁶ I learned all about his history afterwards, I had heard about him before. And now, when he saw Drenica there, he was surprised, he thought, "How can it be Drenica?" He came to me and spoke to me in English. He said "What...? What does Drenica mean?" "I don't know, Drenica, Drenica!" I told him. "But where are you from?" Then he started talking to me in Albanian. I told him, "From Kosovo!" "But where from in Kosovo?" I said, "From Drenica." "And what is your name?" I said, "Shaqir Gashi." I said, "We're cousins as well." So, the first days, I will never forget that I got acquainted with Luan Gashi, and he always came to my restaurant. And after we got to know each other better, he would come more often and one day he asked me, "How do you find it here, America?" I said, "I like it very much. But I have a problem." He said, "What problem do you have?" I said, "I can't learn the English language. I still can't find my way around." He said, "Slow down cousin, because if the baby

²⁴ Isa Boletini (1864-1916), an Albanian nationalist figure and guerrilla fighter. He was one of the leaders of the Albanian Revolt of 1910 the Kosovo Vilajet and became a major figure of Albanian struggle against the Ottomans and Serbia and Montenegro.

²⁵ The *Balli Kombëtar* (National Front) movement was 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.

²⁶ *Lidhja Kosovare* (League of Kosovo) was an organisation established in the beginning of the 1960s in the USA, to raise awareness about the Kosovo national question.

doesn't spend nine months in the mother's womb, it will be born premature. You have just arrived and you want to know English perfectly."

So, it was truly a great pleasure, Albanians would come and we got to know each other in that restaurant... it was very interesting, that we had not heard about those people before. Sahit Kryeziu, Rexhep Krasniqi, whom I mentioned before, Mexhit Dibra, they all used to come. Then after a while we, sometime around '72, '71-'72, I sent an affidavit on behalf of Kajtaz Fazlija and he came from Kosovo directly to the United States of America. When he arrived, I introduced him to all those who were against Yugoslavia, although Kajtaz during this time wasn't very afraid, he was being careful. So, I recall some very interesting things...

Now after Drenica, after Drenica, we then started doing some really good jobs, what did I know, the rents were low... they weren't expensive. We would make some money, we would be introduced to Albanians. I remember that when we started selling pieces – what we call a slice of pizza - it was 20 cents, I made it 25 cents (laughs). I brought up the price to 25 cents.

So then after the restaurant, I became very successful and I opened another restaurant on Third Avenue, 7th street, 18th street, which I named Trepça.²⁷ I have many memories from Trepça, there were, at that time, some intellectuals who were working in Yugoslavia who came there. For instance, what was his name, Osman Gashi. One day Osman Gashi brought Ukshin Hoti, Ukshin Hoti came to study here in America, something in Criminal Studies most likely, I don't know. And he came to the restaurant Trepça, Osman had gone out for something, he stayed at the table and was looking at me, he said, "Where are you from?" I told him, "I am from Kosovo." "But where from in Kosovo?" I said, "I am from Drenica!" He said, "What do you do here?" Now I thought, this guy seems a bit arrogant, what do I do here... I said, "Sir, I work in the restaurant, with food, with these things." He said, "Come, sit here, you Drenica man, because I don't want to do just restaurant business, I want to get my hands on Albanian issues." I will never forget the conversation we had. I remember... I will never forget when he told me, "We Albanians have given 226 generals to the Turkish army, but we have left ourselves crippled. I want you to get engaged in the activities for the Albanian nation, because this is America, there is democracy, I want you to..." And to tell you the truth, since then, it was around '74-'75, most likely '75, since then, I've had a great inspiration. The last time I saw Ukshin Hoti, I was attending the [celebration of the] League of Prizren,²⁸ therefore I thank Pajazit Nushi²⁹ even today. In that time, he invited me and honored me and I attended the League of

²⁷ Trepça is the large industrial and mining complex in Mitrovica, one of the largest in former Yugoslavia. It was acquired by a British company in the 1930s and nationalized by socialist Yugoslavia after the war.

²⁸ This was the 1878 Albanian Alliance that fought against border changes decided at the Congress of Berlin by the Great Powers. The League demanded autonomy from the Ottoman Empire. The building where the Albanian leaders made their *besa* (sworn alliance) is on the river, upstream from the center of town. It is now a museum. The current building is a reconstruction of the original one, which Serbian troops burned down in 1999.

²⁹ Watch the oral history interview with Pajazit Nushi.

Prizren for the 100th Anniversary of the League of Prizren in Kosovo. What else should I tell you? (smiles)
Ask me about other things... (laughs).

War

Later the Kosovo Liberation Army appeared. I remember the first visit, when Xhavit Haliti and Azem Syla came. We received them. They all told us that the Kosovo Liberation Army was real, “They’re not terrorists, we want to fight, we want to liberate [Kosovo],” and so on... And I remember, for example, the first campaign, when we went to Brooklyn to collect some funds, but all the businessmen of that time were afraid because in America there was this labeling, this information, that they [the KLA] were terrorists. Eventually it was.... [incompreh.] in... there was some evidence, I had the opportunity to go to the Congress and so it came [to], so, the label was removed, that they were terrorists, but that they fought for their homes, fought for independence.

Also, I remember when we came back, all the power of the Albanian Diaspora went to the other side, I mean, they went to the side of the Kosovo Liberation Army, each Albanian contributed money, and personal presence... we established this Club, the Atlantic Battalion where today we have the three heroes, the Bytyqi brothers.³⁰ We’ve brought them back here, and we commemorate them annually. And so on, I don’t know what more to say, but I want to say that for example, there are Albanians who contributed a lot. I can mention some, but as I said I can’t mention the *Malësorë* because they’re a lot, but I’ll mention Zgjim Xhema, Rexhë Xhakli, Bruno Selimaj, Din Derdi and others who were active. We also had Sami Repishti who was a man of letters and numbers. And so, I can say that the Albanian Lobby had an important role for the Albanian question in general.

Sulejman Gashi: During the 1998-99 war in Kosovo many people had their families there, your family was in Vojnik, were you in touch with them?

Shaqir Gashi: The war is very interesting. It was Flag Day in 1997, I had a restaurant somewhere in Madison Avenue at the beginning of the street there, and a friend of mine, Hys Shkreli to be more exact called me and said, “Gashi, do you know what is happening? You people from Drenica started another war.” I thought he was joking, he was cracking a joke as we say. “Yes, yes” he said, “you started a war.” When eventually I found out that my cousin Abedin “Sandokan”³¹ publicly fired the first shot against Serbs,

³⁰ The Bytyqi brothers (Ylli, Agron and Mehmet), US citizens of Albanian origin, joined the Atlantic Battalion to fight with the KLA. After the June 1999 peace agreement, they agreed to escort several Roma neighbours to Serbia. But when they strayed over an unmarked boundary line near Merdare, they were arrested by Serbian police for illegally entering what was then Yugoslavia. After serving their sentences, they were re-arrested, and on evening of July 9, 1999, they were tied up with wire and executed with shots to the back of the neck. Their remains were exhumed in June 2001 from a mass grave in the village of Petrovo and taken to Yonkers, New York. The Serbian war crimes prosecution indicted two police officers, for transporting the brothers across Serbia, but they were both acquitted in 2012.

³¹ Abedin Rexha, known by his nom-de-guerre Sandokan, was a KLA commander from Vojnik. He was killed in 1998 in a shoot out with other KLA fighters.

and from that point on more people joined and the resistance began. We supported it with our flesh and our souls, we've had our griefs. We heard for example about the massacre in Likoshan, the one of the legendary commander Adem Jashari, the one in Zbica so... all of them saddened us up to a point we couldn't sleep for 24 hours.

Sulejman Gashi: Kosovo's Independence was declared on February 17, 2008, now it's going to be seven years. How did you experience this?

Shaqir Gashi: I remember this event with the greatest joy of my life. I remember it because this was almost a hundred year war (smiles), I mean, it's a war also of those people who fought earlier. I was thinking that they could not experience the declaration of independence, because earlier we had one demand, only Kosovo republic. And now from a republic, it became completely independent, that was a great joy. I remember when we went to Times Square. The Albanian Diaspora of New York, New Jersey, using the latest technology, got over 10-15 thousand people together to celebrate in Times Square. All the police of that time, and all the United States of America congratulated and supported our great state.

Activism

Then after that restaurant Trepça which I had opened, I expanded more and I opened another restaurant which I named Kosova. It was registered as Kosova but it was called Il Galletto, which had a great role, we will talk about it later. And at that time, around '78, '79, some representatives from Kosovo started arriving, it was, as I said earlier, Osman Gashi, Riza Visoka, Bardh Pula, Ali Kryeziu and others. All of them were coming to our restaurants, to my restaurants. In those times there were no other Albanian restaurants but mine, therefore I really felt proud. And I was pleased then, and I am happy and pleased now, I feel proud because I am among the first to start, but after a while we increased, but we'll talk about that later.

I remember sometime around '77, '78, I don't know, we had a restaurant there called La Triestina, and would you believe that [the city of] Trieste sent me a reward from over there because I named it Trieste. It wasn't that... people did not know, they did not know us, nor did they know where Kosovo is, where is Albania. So now I named the restaurant Trieste because I felt nostalgic because I had left, I had come from Trieste to immigrate here. During that time the father of Chevy Chase, who worked with John Belushi, used to come. John Belushi, I understood then, but later as well, made his son famous. One day his father came to the restaurant and in my restaurant you had to be dressed well or something like that, I felt bad telling him because I did not know whose father he was, I had just heard that he was an artist. And I told him, "Come, let me take you out to lunch somewhere, to another restaurant." And I brought him to a place nearby called Gallina, and we talked. He said to me, "You Italians are proud." I told him, "Sir, with much due respect, I am not Italian, I am Albanian. I am Albanian." "Where is Albania? What is that Albania?" I said, "Sir, it's too bad for you that you do not to know about the Albanian nation." "Why should I know?" I said, "You should know better than anyone." "Why?" I said, "John Belushi made your son

famous... and you don't know it." He said, "John Belushi is not Albanian, he is Italian." I said, "Sir, he is Albanian. He is not only Albanian, he is my cousin, too."

So, in a word, we nearly had a bet (laughs) and he went and told Chevy Chase, he said, "A man says that he is a cousin of John Belushi, he's Albanian." He said, "Yes dad, he is Albanian." And then he came and apologized to me and his son Chevy Chase and John Belushi, the artists started coming. So it is since then that the name Gashi Belushi stuck, and I still use it today. It is very interesting. For example, in those times, they did not know these things.

So after '79, in '80, as I said earlier, representatives from Kosovo were coming, they were coming to our restaurants, we were getting to know each other. You know, in all honesty, I have great memories with Ali Kryeziu and Bardh Pula and with some others who used to come, for example, we all talked about the Albanian cause, you know. They were a bit scared, they were telling us the things that were happening. Finally, when the 1982 demonstrations happened, the Diaspora became aware and something had to be done.

I remember, I will never forget, the night Bajram Bytyqi was there, he was the director of a factory somewhere in Suhareka. And he had to go back there, he was very worried. So, at this point demonstrations were happening, we were not very organized because here, as I said before, when I first came to the United States of America, we had met for instance with emigrants who had left during the war or before the war. They had one opinion, we had another one. For example, when we started discussing something about the national cause, we wanted to be part of Albania because we got involved while there [in the US], but at that point we could split the differences. For example, we later found out that the previous emigrants were against [a nationalist] ideology, while we, on the other hand, thought that they did not like Albania. And the relations amongst us were poor.

Therefore, when the demonstrations began, when we started uniting, the demonstrations happened and what else, and I remember a very interesting detail. To tell you the truth, during that time my businesses were doing well, my work was doing very well, and at that time there was this Ramadan Xhema, Xhefë Xhema's brother, who contributed a lot to the national cause. And one day he arrived there with that... with some others, other friends, and he told me, "What shall we do? The war has begun in Kosovo, it is impossible!"

To tell you the truth, I don't know if I said it before, at that time we were a few Albanians who had initiated contact with the Albanian Mission... at the United Nations. And at that time I remember when Abdyl Baleta was here, I and Bruno Selimaj - for whom I have great respect because he has contributed a lot, all Albanians know his contribution - we decided that we now wanted to go somewhere to do something, to consult with the official Mission because the war was starting. Frankly speaking, we were a bit naïve (laughs). And we went, I will never forget, to Adyl Baleta there, he took us from the Mission, we went for dinner. He said, "Take it easy because all these things are well known to the Albanian state, the Workers Party knows them, Enver [Hoxha] knows, he knows these things. Don't rush into these things." So, we

turned out to be a bit naïve. It was very interesting that, for example, Bruno Selimaj had gone once to Albania and knew the terrain and we were thinking to go, Bruno and I, I through Drenica, he through Plav and Gusia, to bring weapons into Kosovo. But that was a bit... {opens arms} (laughs), but that is what the times were like then.

So, we began doing something now. What should we do, how should we do it? One day, Ramadan Xhema and I, we together, he says, “We’re going to do something!” “Do what?” He said, “We will, we will inform the American Congress and the Senate about what is happening in the demonstrations of ’81 in Kosovo.” What should we do now, how should we proceed? There was the Kosova Diaspora Youth,³² at the time Tahir Kërnaža was working on some things and I had respect for him and I had a wide cooperation with him. We took some of his copies [leaflets] and on his behalf, on behalf of the Kosova Diaspora Youth, we sent 500 telegrams. There was no fax back then, 500 telegrams to 500 congressmen and 100 senators, to let them know that something bad was happening in Kosovo. They are torturing students, they are detaining students and so on. And we went to a post office somewhere around Fifth Avenue, Ramadan Xhema and I, and we went there and the postal worker in the post office was Irish. During that time the Irish were doing their own demonstrations, and he almost understood what was going on with us, you know (smiles).

So, to tell you how much it cost us, maybe it isn’t appropriate, but we paid around 3,500 or 4,000 dollars to deliver the telegrams directly and when Congressmen and Senators arrived [to their offices], what was happening in Kosovo was on their desks. And I am convinced that since that time when they received those telegrams, they started thinking about us differently. For instance, I remember when we went to some demonstrations, they did not let us grow that much, there was some difference. Yugoslav propaganda was very strong during that time, Yugoslavia and the United States of America had a good friendship. But slowly, as time passed, we started some demonstrations, there were for instance Albanians who had come from... for example, after me, or what do I know. I want to say this as well, that I believe, someone told me that I might be the third or fourth person to come from Kosovo to the United States of America, who immigrated to America.

I remember there was just some guy, Ymer from Pristina, and some guy, Muharrem Broja who came here, I don’t remember any other. So, they started coming slowly, moving away from there, and getting ready, but always with some fear. Albanians from Kosovo went to the demonstrations mostly with masks, so that they wouldn’t be seen because it was dangerous since we always thought that we would return to Kosovo, when we would go back, things would get a little better, but the situation was getting worse and harsher. And so on...

³² *Rinia Shiptare Kosovare ne Botën e Lirë* (Albanian Kosovar Youth in the Free World), organization of the Albanian community in the US, founded by Tahir Kërnaža in 1960 to raise awareness about the Yugoslav state repression in Kosovo.

That is how we started demonstrating by getting mobilized, getting to know each other and what do I know. But sometime around '85, '86, we had a different destiny. One day, during the campaign for Bush, for Bush Senior, they had a campaign [event] for him, and some Albanians went there to attend. At that event, there was Joseph DioGuardi with his father. And while they were speaking, they heard his father speaking some words in *Arbëresh*³³ Albanian and Ramadan Xhema, he was very attentive and heard those words and said, "Wait a minute, this man is speaking Albanian!" Little by little, they find out that his father knew Albanian, the *Arbëresh* language, and Joseph DioGuardi, we found out later, was his son and we were introduced. At that time, he was a Congressman.

And now Ramadan Xhema comes to me and tells me, "We have good news, we have found an *Arbëresh* Congressman named Joseph DioGuardi, we must talk with him and get active to see what we should do to stay in touch with him." And I told Ramadan to immediately bring Joseph DioGuardi to my restaurant, and I will not forget, the first time we were introduced to him, speaking frankly, he didn't have much knowledge about the Albanian national cause. I must compliment myself from that day until now, and I am proud of it, he says, "I have learned from Gashi because you have taught me about the status of Albanians, about Albania and Kosovo all over the ethnic territories." So, slowly but surely, we established a friendship with DioGuardi.

But now the situation in Kosovo was worsening by the day. To tell you the truth, we didn't have great capacities, as I said Yugoslav propaganda was very strong. In the past we would get together in restaurants and we would discuss what we could do next. We would calculate all the things that we couldn't do, didn't have capacities to do, etc. Then someone had to, to form a lobby. So we were lobbying to lobby. You know things were not certain. So one day, sometime around, around late '89, some Albanians got together, the businessmen of the time who were doing a bit better and we discussed, with DioGuardi, too, I said that, with DioGuardi, we had established an Albanian lobby that might help the Albanian cause. Initially there were from five to six of us, who shook hands, we were obliged by *besa*³⁴ to work for the Albanian national cause, especially for Kosovo. So I remember, for example, that DioGuardi was in Bruno's [Selimaj] restaurant, where they formed the Albanian lobby, Shyqiri Selimaj later, I didn't speak about Bruno, since I have many interesting things to tell you about him (smiles).

So we formed the first lobby, the first lobby was formed by Xhim Xhema, then Din Derti [inc.] Dedi, Bruno Selimaj, Mitch Thomas, Samuel Prishteva [inc.] and I. So we started there and we immediately brought in DioGuardi, we didn't know what DioGuardi said, "First, one should know the concept of how the United States functions, if we learn that concept then we can contribute to the national cause." We learned from him, frankly speaking DioGuardi has merits, he is a history on his own that I can say was very, very

³³ The *Arbëresh* language is an archaic form of Albanian spoken by the Albanian community called *Arbëresh*, which settled in Italy after the death of Skenderbeg in the fifteenth century.

³⁴ In Albanian customary law, *besa* is the word of honor, faith, trust, protection, truce, etc. It is a key instrument for regulating individual and collective behavior at times of conflict, and is connected to the sacredness of hospitality, or the unconditioned extension of protection to guests.

important and right on the spot we formed the Albanian Lobby, The Albanian American Civic League led by Joseph DioGuardi.

Now, other things followed, we started demonstrations, he then began going to Congress and approved resolutions. I remember it as if it happened today, we started the first activity somewhere in Park Avenue, there was a group of us, I also have those pictures which I can show you whenever you want. We started with D'Amato, with Senator D'Amato, who was the best friend of Albanians at the time... from the first hours. And so on, we started making friends, then we made friends with Robert Dole and others.

But, later, the most interesting thing was, we were demonstrating, protesting in front of the United Nations, it became like our [second] home. If a week, two or three passed without going there, it felt weird. So, not a week or a day passed without demonstrating. We had some problems during demonstrations, for instance there was the issue of the flag with or without a star,³⁵ which was dangerous, and it could have nearly caused an accident. But at one point all Albanians, when it was for the Albanian national cause, decided that stars or no stars, it didn't matter, the only thing that mattered was to join the demonstration (smiles).

Then, around '89 DioGuardi gave me a phone call, he said, "I would like to introduce you to Congressman Tom Lantos, he is a Democratic Congressman from California." He said, "We have a meeting somewhere in Yonkers, and I want you to go there." Now, we gathered several Albanians, the Voice of America was there, too. Some of us Albanians had gathered there, everyone was talking, the demonstrators, the Albanian goal was to overthrow Albania as soon as possible, that is, the ideology. On the other hand, the other group that was there, the ones on this side {shows with hand}, we didn't want them to touch our Albania, we just wanted to discuss the Kosovo issue (laughs). So, they respected me, I was nearly the oldest one, and they placed me next to Congressman Tom Lantos and his wife Annette, I will never forget, I have great memories with him. And we started discussing, he asked me - at that time I had three or four restaurants in Manhattan - and Tom Lantos said, "These are the United States of America, this is democracy, let's take Gashi, he started as a busboy and now he has three or four restaurants, this is America, this is democracy."

And there were some Albanians who took the floor, they were from Albania as I said before, they were giving Albania priority over Kosovo. I took the floor and said, "Today I want us to discuss the Kosovo issue, because Kosovo is occupied. Albania is occupied by itself, and I believe that slowly it will get settled." But our main focus was that Kosovo was occupied, genocide was taking place, students were being expelled, they were being detained, the army was coming, they were murdering the soldiers,³⁶ the ones who were serving, and many more.

³⁵ The flag with a star would have been the flag of Communist Albania.

³⁶ Reference to a significant number of deaths among Albanian recruits in the army which were officially ruled suicides though the families never accepted those rulings.

And after I finished my talk, he said, “Mr. Gashi, you love Albania a lot.” I said, “Yes, Mr. Congressman I love it, because it is my mother country.” He said, “My wish today is to walk on the Boulevard of Tirana.” Now I {points at himself}, when he said, “to walk,” I thought that he was thinking of going and occupying Albania (laughs). Eh, we didn’t understand some things, and I frowned a bit. He noticed this and he said, “Look, stop here. You thought wrongly, I am not thinking of going as an occupier, but as a friend.” He related the situation to some of his memories of Hungary, because he had Hungarian origins. And now, after he explained that he had a wish to go to Albania, based on my relationship with the Albanian Mission, I said, “Listen here Congressman, we promise that you will set foot in Tirana.” I phoned DioGuardi immediately and with great joy I went to the Albanian Mission, and I said, “I have a very important question and we need to approve this thing.” “What, what’s happening?” I said this and that and explained, “It would be good to go and establish a relationship, to start a relationship with the United States of America and we will help Kosovo, and it is good to establish a relationship with the United States of America.”

At that time, Bashkim Pitarka was the Ambassador, he said, “Look, slowly, this may be the truth, we need to see, to talk. Comrade Gashi, don’t rush, we will send you with a group to Albania.” Some movement had started, there were some signs that Albania had given some signs that something was to be done, something must... (laughs) happen. And to make a long story short, we had to work a long time to be able to send Tom Lantos, a year or two later, it was sometime around ‘90. In ‘90 you all know that there was an attempted attack on Enver Hadri in Brussels. He was the leader of the time there after Jusuf Gërvalla, he was a great activist but they murdered him.³⁷

And now, some friends, with whom we had formed the Albanian Lobby, and I, we, we had some good information, our authority had increased a bit, the Albanian Diaspora were supporting us from New York, California, Chicago and many more places I don’t know of. Therefore, I told them, “Shall we go to Enver Hadri’s funeral?” He heard me and we got ready, DioGuardi, Din Derdi and Rexhë Xhakli. And we got on a plane and went to Enver Hadri’s funeral in Brussels. When we went to Brussels, there... our idea was that the Albanian Lobby would establish a contact with the European Diaspora. When I went there the only person I knew was Musa Hoti, I heard recently that he was murdered, and I phoned him to tell him that we are here with the Congressmen and the Albanian American Civic League, he said, “Come visit us.” We went to the Sheraton Hotel and within an hour, more than two thousand people had surrounded the Sheraton Hotel, you know, they were so willing to come and meet with us. And there we spoke about what to do, it was a funeral. And when we woke up the following morning, I will never forget I was sharing a room with Din Derdi. Din Derdi, when I speak about him, his name, I cry because that man has contributed a lot, a lot, a lot for Kosovo, and I believe that Kosovo owes him an acknowledgement. {He addresses the interviewer} What happened? (laughs and cries) {smokes his e-cigarette}.

³⁷ Enver Hadri (1941-1990) was an Albanian nationalist activists gunned down in Brussels. Jusuf Gervalla (1945-1982) was a poet and also nationalist activist killed in Germany together with his brother and a third person. All these killings have been widely attributed to Yugoslav agents, though no investigation has come to a conclusive identification of the killers.

Sylejman Gashi: Let's take a break.

[The video is interrupted, the speaker and interviewers take a break.]

Shaqir Gashi: Now that we are talking about the activities of Albanians with the friends we made in the Senate and Congress, I recall some details. We made friends with Robert Dole, whom we know has always been and still is a friend to Albanians. In 1983 there was a campaign because he wanted to run for the Presidency of the United States of America. He was from the Republican Party, he was against Bush Senior. From what I remember, the most credit goes to Xhim Xhema when he made a place for Albanians, we went to New Hampshire with a big car decorated all over with American and Albanian flags and spent nearly a week there. There are many things that I remember, for example we went to New Hampshire, there was a snow-storm, I will never forget.

But here I will give the most credit to the *Malësorë* from Montenegro who were with us and I must mention all their names. They were Luigj Canaj, Zefë Kalaj and few others, I can't remember their names, and they were great guys. There were about seven or eight of us with Bruno Selimaj and we went to the field. They had put Robert Dole posters on this side, on the other side {shows the opposite site with his hand} Bush. We went before dawn, we went to bed early. We took down Bush's posters wherever they were and put Robert Dole's.

On one occasion, it was about five or six o'clock in the morning, the sheriff arrived and caught us. He said, "What are you doing here?" We said, "We are with Robert Dole, we want him to be President." He said, "Well ok, but you have no right to take down these posters, these pictures. You can put up your posters next to him, but do not remove them." We also said that, "See here, we..." "We can arrest you." "Forgive us, we really like Robert Dole and we want him to become the President of the United States of America." He said, "Since you are Albanians, you will get away with it this time, we won't arrest you."

And I remember then after all these things we all went out to the field, everyone to a different town, I was given a different town, I can't remember the name. We had to phone people to say, "Come out to vote for Robert Dole." When I made a phone call, a woman answered and she told me, "I would come, but I have a small child and I have no one to look after him." I said, "Look, if that's a problem, I will pay for it." And really (laughs) I paid someone 50 or 60 dollars to look after her child, so she could come and vote. So, we Albanians had a great wish. We were greatly pleased that we had made a friend for Kosovo, for the Albanian nation, for Albania, for Kosovo, for all Albanian lands.

So, Robert Dole was our friend, and he wasn't the only one, although he had reserved a place for himself as we say and then there was Senator D'Amato, Senator Pearl, Presley, Congressman Gilman, Longfield, and others supported us when we went to demonstrate. I remember another thing, after we finished the whole campaign, the so-called convention was taking place. There were 60 of us, and we had to assign duties - who would be a journalist, who would be something else, you see they appointed me journalist (laughs). It was very interesting there, they put a piece of paper here on my chest and it said, "Albanian

Journalist.” In fact, I had no idea about journalism, but I got myself through it. And I remember a very interesting detail, what was the name of that Greek who was running for President too?

Sylejman Gashi: Dukakis?

Shaqir Gashi: Dukakis! Dukakis, and now as a journalist I took the microphone and I held it close to him, and asked, “Let’s suppose you become President of the United States of America, what can you tell us about Kosovo?” He got so offended with the question that he nearly broke the microphone like this {moves his hand}. He said, “Eh who, who is Kosovo? I am not interested in Kosovo at all!” I have another memory, I was at the same table with Peter Jennings, Ted Koppel and all the famous journalists because I was a journalist now, and I was sitting at the same table with them. So, at the end we didn’t win, Bush won. But we always, always supported him [Dole].

I remember many things, campaigns we went to, raising money for campaigns, with money, with everything... We had a strong will. Where did we get that will, I don’t know, but to tell you the truth, Joseph DioGuardi gave us that will and all that energy, by opening the doors of the Congress and the Senate. And also the support of the people. I believe that DioGuardi deserves special credit for that particular time. He, he always fought, and we went with him. I have great memories with DioGuardi, as I said earlier I went to Enver Hadri’s funeral. We went to Geneva, we went to Australia, and anywhere we went, our main goal was to make another friend for Kosovo.

Therefore, I can say that we have succeeded to some extent, now we can go back to what I said before. You know a historical thing that was very important around the ‘90s, when Dr. Rugova came to the United States of America for the first time, this is very interesting. At that time, in ‘89 the *Malësorë* led by Toni Miraka, provided a letter of invitation for Ibrahim Rugova and Engjëll Sejda to come to the first lectures about Bogdani,³⁸ and I will never forget that. It was organized very well and they came to visit, but those of us in the Presidency of the Lobby got some very bad news. For instance, they told me, “You dare not go since you are in the Presidency of the Lobby, you can’t attend, because they have Yugoslav passports and most certainly Yugoslavia has sent them to do something bad among us.” So, after that, even someone from the Albanian Mission anonymously told me that I should not dare go there, and so I did not go, neither did Bruno, Bruno Selimaj. But... I always felt bad because we never went to that gathering.

The following day after that lecture was over, he went to visit Seli Bytyçi.³⁹ When I mention Seli Bytyçi, I tell you frankly he has contributed to the Albanian cause, especially to Kosovo. Although we had some differences, we would argue when we met but we never... the friendship always continued. And he rang me on the phone, he said, “Dr. Rugova and Engjëll Sejda are here, if you want to come over for coffee, come.” I said to Bruno, “Shall we go?” I said, “We will go, because I don’t think there are such Albanians that Yugoslavia would send to destroy us, the Albanian Lobby, to destroy the Diaspora.”

³⁸ Pjeter Bogdani (1630-1689), Catholic poet born in the area of Prizren, and one of the first authors of early Albanian literature.

³⁹ Also known as Sergio Bitici.

We got up, Bruno and I, in those days Seli Bytyçi had a restaurant, which they called Toscana 54, we went there, we were introduced to Rugova and Engjëll Sejda, we chatted. I started telling some stories from Drenica. And so, we agreed that all the responses were positive for our understanding on that day and age. And we became friends quickly with them, and we decided to get out of that restaurant and go to the Rainbow Room. The Rainbow Room is fluorescent, it's a restaurant, it's on the 80th floor and it's a very expensive place and from there you can see all of Manhattan {shows his palms}. We were a few friends, we had some... I remember Ramiz Llapatica was with us, and some *Malësorë* were with us. One of us was not wearing shoes, he was wearing sneakers, and we could not go upstairs unless we were wearing shoes. We forced him to buy a pair of shoes just so that our friend didn't miss out (laughs).

And we went to the Rainbow Room and we put our cards on the table. Now, Rugova during that time was president of... a writer, right. Therefore, we immediately told him that we were from the Albanian Lobby and that we wanted to coordinate all the contacts, "Inform us about what is going on in Kosovo and let's work together for the Kosovo cause and the cause of Albanians in Yugoslavia." Rugova agreed, we had a few coffees, we changed hotels, we remained good friends with him, we saw them off, they had very good cooperation with some other countries. Then after some time, around the spring of '90, the situation in Kosovo was getting worse by the day, Robert Dole and Tom Lantos and some other Congressmen, Senators, listened to us and went on their own to check the situation in Pristina and what was going on there.

But finally, we decided to organize a hearing in Washington. And we invited all the Kosovo intellectuals of the time, Idriz Ajeti, Dr. Rugova, Rexhep Qosja, Hydajeta Pula, Gazmend Pula, Matoshi and others whose names I won't say because there were too many... Hajrullah Gorani. And now we prepared for this hearing, the hearing was being led by the Congressman, Albanians' best friend, the late Tom Lantos. He is late, because he died. And so, we organized it, and there were questions, when Rugova arrived with that delegation, about who would know Rugova. Someone said, "Gashi knows him because they've met before and he is friend with him." And like that, both the State Department and the Presidency of the Albanian Lobby appointed me to accompany Rugova, to greet him when he arrived.

It is very, I don't know, people don't know these things. And when they arrived, we went to Dallas, no, to Washington, to greet them upon their arrival, we checked them into hotels. We went to one room with Rugova, and after an hour the security guys came and said, "We have bad news!" "What is the news?" He said, "We have news that someone is attempting to attack Dr. Rugova. And we need to be very careful," they told me. I had been appointed as interpreter as well, because I knew him, and so the situation got a bit intimidating. Each hour there was other news, I also remember this, honestly when we were going downstairs in the hotel, we had to change elevators. It wasn't the same elevator, another elevator was needed to get to the second floor. See, there was information that someone wanted to attempt the assassination of Rugova.

Anyway, we were all vigilant but we didn't know about what. Later, security came and brought me a letter with three names. He said, "What does this mean in your Albanian language?" "*Jahu, jahe, jahush*," as written, they were all missing letters. And I said, "They all have a meaning in Albanian, but I don't know what they mean like this." "Ok," he said, "Just be careful." The following day we went... to the hearing. At the hearing, that hearing was very interesting, about five to six thousand Albanians had come from all over the United States of America to find out what we were doing in that hearing. But, the venue where the hearing took place was a small venue, it didn't hold many people, you know we were possibly 60 to 70 people. And then I remember when the people from Serbia arrived, those "Karadjordjević,"⁴⁰ those priests who lifted three fingers.⁴¹ They were on one side, and we Albanians were on the other side.

And the hearing started there. And now everyone was giving a testimony, but I remember the strongest testimony, the most convincing one at that time was given by Luljeta Pula. I am truly saying that both Rexhep Qosja and Ibrahim Rugova as well, everyone in the delegation that came to America at that time, in my opinion, was convincing. I mean, they convinced the Congress, they convinced the Senate about what was going on over there. For instance, Luljeta Pula testified with arguments describing, "The poisoning of students,⁴² the execution of...all the other materials." We won. And I can say there was, as we say in Albanian, "The ice was broken." So, after that we made friends and we finished the job. Albanians came out to greet us, we were all happy, we were celebrating, but we had also prepared a lunch, a dinner somewhere in the Sheraton Hotel, which was attended by two to three thousand people.

All the members of the Lobby, returned as soon as possible with the whole delegation to prepare for the dinner at the Sheraton Hotel, while one part of the delegation, Rugova, a few others and I, stayed and came a bit later. We went to the hotel, we woke up the following day at the hotel, the security came to pick us up. They came with a big limo, I was with Dr. Rugova and when we entered the car, they brought us to visit the three unknown soldiers that they guard in Washington, and they got out and performed a great respectful salutation, nearly a military one. And to tell you the truth, I was very happy, we had achieved our goal at the end of that visit.

A security guard came all wired {point at his chest with his hands} and he told me, "I have good news to pass on to Dr. Rugova." I said, "May it will be for good." He said "From today, he is the President of Kosovo." He said, "Why have we made him President of Kosovo? Because when we ask the Yugoslav Embassy, and we tell them Ibrahim Rugova..." We hear him talk about something, "They say, 'We don't recognize him.' We have decided, and you have the opportunity to congratulate him on the title of

⁴⁰ Reference to the Serbian dynasty.

⁴¹ The three finger salute, made by using the thumb, index and the middle finger, is also known as the Serbian nationalist salute.

⁴² Reference to the events of March 1990, when thousands of Albanian school children from all over Kosovo showed symptoms of poisoning. There has never been so far a conclusive explanation of this epidemic. Investigators, both national and international, met various obstacles by state authorities in conducting independent research and split on whether the children had been purposefully poisoned by sarin gas or the victims of "mass hysteria."

President.” I was happy, pretty much... “Turn around Rugova, because this, and that, and this is the story, from today you are the President of Kosovo,” I congratulated him on the title of President.

Because of that, because of the joy that we had, I told the staff that was guarding us, I told them, “Find me a beautiful restaurant somewhere, because I want to treat you to dinner, because you went through so much trouble for us. You have supported us, organized us, escorted us, I want to treat you to lunch.” They said, “Are you sure it should be the best restaurant?” I said, “Yes, yes, the best restaurant that exists in Washington!” I am really sorry I forgot the name of that restaurant, but it was an expensive restaurant, you see maybe it is not good to share this here, but one bottle of wine cost one thousand dollars and one plate fifty, sixty dollars. But I covered those expenses because I was the secretary of the Lobby, of the Albanian Civic League and I had authorization to spend money. I provided the dinner there, we had fun, we talked.

And after we finished the lunch there, they told me, “You will go and buy two airplane tickets, and those tickets should not be in your name or Rugova’s name.” When I went to the airport to buy those tickets, I don’t know, it doesn’t matter how much they cost, I took them and I wrote Sokol on one, Shpat on the other and I put them in my pocket. And now they were escorting us to the airport, it was odd, five or six limos with lights ahead, five or six behind following us and screaming about their issues it was very interesting. Then during the trip they told me, “We have only escorted Gorbachev like this when he first came, and now Ibrahim Rugova.” And now we were going to the airport, when we got to the airplane, there were about twenty to thirty people. We got on the airplane, no one asked me about the tickets or anything. Everyone lit cigarettes, everyone was smoking and I told Rugova, “Come on. Let’s light one, you and I, because everybody is smoking cigarettes,” because it was forbidden to smoke cigarettes on the airplane then. We each lit a cigarette and we had a conversation.

When we landed in LaGuardia Airport, they came out with machine guns {shows with hands} and they were guarding the airplane like this. And now with our friends from security, we became sort of friends and I told him, “What is this?” He said, “This is because someone attempted to assassinate Rugova, and they wanted to protect him.” And now jokingly I tell him, “Rugova, pardon Mr. President, can I ask you a question?” He said, “Yes, Shaqë?” I said, “Do you see these people with machine guns who have come out here?” “Yes?” I said, “They are here because someone is attempting an attack on you. Tell me the truth, are you scared?” The late one smiled a bit, he didn’t say anything, he said, “And are you scared?” I said, “I want them to shoot me in the forehead, because I am entering history suddenly and unexpectedly” (smiles).

So we left the airport, we were escorted again... very good security. We came to Manhattan, all the streets were blocked when we passed through. We went to the Sheraton Hotel, we stayed there because the dinner was going to take place there. And then we were late a bit, and they were guarding us by the security door. He was smoking, I was smoking, the room was full of cigarette smoke. When security came, we opened the door and the cigarette smoke went like this {illustrates the direction of the smoke}, they

walked back. They said, “We don’t have [to protect you] ... smoking will kill you.” Of course he was referring to Rugova, but he meant the same for me.

So, we went down, it was a fantastic dinner that was attended by two to three thousand people. Each one took the floor when he spoke. Rexhep Qosja spoke there, I will never forget when he spoke, he said, “You have left Kosovo because of injustice. We could not give you rights, because we didn’t even have rights for ourselves. You left for different reasons, work, the economy. We couldn’t, because we weren’t there.” And so everyone had spoken. We were standing up during that time, we were saying, “Kosovo Republic! Kosovo Republic!” shouting, but they couldn’t tell the truth, they couldn’t because they were going back.

Hence, in my calculations, that visit was historic and will remain historic. Because, from there, from that time, for example, I will just tell you a detail and you know it well. For instance, whatever happened in Kosovo at the time, the complaints of Kosovo intelligence of the time, those complaints were taken and sent to Belgrade. Belgrade had ordered to address those injustices. Kosovo Albanians were complaining to Belgrade. Since the day that the hearing happened, complaints didn’t go to Belgrade, but they came to the American Congress, the Senate, because now, we took them, we always invited them to testify as individuals or I don’t know. So it was now very interesting, because we were making friends as individuals, for instance, all the members of the Lobby made friends. One would say, “This is my friend. That is my friend.” DioGuardi didn’t really agree with that.

And then we invited people to come to the hearings. I remember, for example, when Adem Demaçi⁴³ came, the *Malësorë* invited him too. Because here we talked, because the *Malësorë*, to tell you the truth, the highlanders, the Albanian highlanders of Montenegro, Tuz, Malësia, they served Kosovo better than Kosovars themselves, those handsome guys. And then the demonstration happened, they came from Detroit, they came from Chicago, the *Malësorë* were always the first at the demonstrations against the regime. Now I am recalling people who achieved many things, for instance there were people from Australia who came to the hearing. There’s my friend, Besart Krasniqi’s brother-in-law from New Zealand who came twice, he paid for the trip and everything, just to come and participate in the demonstrations. He has contributed... made a great contribution to the Albanian cause. He was a very close friend of Luan Gashi, at the time when they left, when they were young.

So... how can I say this, we tried to do everything, but our capacity wasn’t that great. And I remember, I had a friend there with whom I had been in the [refugee] camp when I came to the United States of America, he is Hebrew by origin – Jewish – his family name is Rosenberg and he often told me, he was following me, he was my friend. He used to say, “Oh Gashi, you Albanians have a bigger problem than your own size.” “Well, what should we do?” He would say, “With that big problem, you must make friends.

⁴³ Adem Demaçi (1936), an Albanian writer and politician and longtime political prisoner who spent a total of 27 years in prison for his nationalist beliefs and activities. In 1998 he became the head of the political wing of the Kosovo Liberation Army, from which he resigned in 1999.

You must have friends, you should look for them.” And that is what we did. We made friends, we made friends with the biggest friend in the world, the democratic state, the United States of America, and every Albanian is indebted to respect, and never forget the help of the United States of America.

And then, things got worse. Rugova was coming and going more often, but the respect was not the same as it was on his first visit, as it was before. But, in my opinion and it is not the only opinion, all Albanians of America supported and loved Rugova and we respected him, and he was right for that time. I only speak on my behalf and for the United States of America, I don’t speak about Kosovo because I don’t know anything. But what I have lived myself, and he has played a big role during that time, was the creation of sub-branches of the Democratic League here in the United States of America. We have all supported the Democratic League, but there were some opponents, because they were saying let’s not... it’s better to all be in one Albanian Lobby so that our power is not divided, is not divided... So, we started creating these sub-branches of the Democratic League. The majority was saying it was wrong, the majority was saying it was right. And so at the end we were somewhat divided when the situation became more difficult, for example.

Now I have to speak about Tom Lantos’ visit, the delegation of the Albanian American Civic League went with Joseph DiGuardi and Tom Lantos to Albania in 1990. All the procedures to go to Albania had been approved, but Tom Lantos’, the Congressman’s staff here, requested an invitation letter to Albania. For instance, the Albanian state had written, “Come, you are welcome, you may come.” But this wasn’t really appropriate because Congress, their procedures, required an invitation letter saying that Albania is inviting him to come and visit the Albanian state [for the first time] after fifty years. So, they received another letter, but they had left that expression there, “Since you have expressed willingness to come to Albania, you are welcome.” But, I didn’t bother anymore [to send it back to the Albanian state] because I was concerned that the visit was going to be ruined and with some of my friends there, we took the letter we corrected it, and it was approved [by the staff].

So, that trip was very interesting because DiGuardi and Tom Lantos first went to Belgrade. At that time, we had the Albanian American Civic radio connection, in which we transmitted news once a week. So I remember very well, at that time Adem Demaçi was released from prison. Now I don’t know if it happened a long time before that. Now I was here in New York, he was in Belgrade and he was conducting the radio show from Belgrade. And for a minute, at that time, I had the first interview with Adem Demaçi. For instance, he talked about his prison memories, what he will do after prison, and other things. At the radio, where we worked, we had friends, they were telling us we had around one hundred recorders recording this conversation. So DiGuardi from Belgrade said, “Guess what happened?” [In English] He said, “I am in the middle of Belgrade, Gashi is over there in New York. We have a visit, we need to go to Kosovo, and from Kosovo we need to go to Albania.” That was a bad thing for Serbs, because they didn’t want movements like that.

So we stayed here, we decided, they left for Belgrade. We finished the program with Adem Demaçi and went back. Now I went back to the restaurant and talked with Bruno. I said to Bruno, “Don’t we need a visa to go to Albania now?” He said, “Honestly, you may be right.” I went there and asked the Albanian Mission. He said, “Gashi, it may happen that you don’t need to go at all, because we will send you with another group.” I got very discouraged, because the Presidency of the Lobby had appointed me to go with Bruno and Din Derdi. As I told you before, Din Derdi was always a great activist. He was, he wasn’t very welcome in Albania, because he had escaped a long time ago. Once again I phoned DioGuardi in Belgrade, and it happened that DioGuardi spoke with Ramiz Alia⁴⁴ in Belgrade. It must have been this, I don’t know for sure. So, immediately the Albanian Mission said, “Come whenever you are ready to leave.”

So, in other words, I wasn’t very prepared. I will never forget Gjergj Kalaj had bought our tickets for Tirana. We left, Bruno, Din Derdi and I, we got on the plane and went to... Zürich. When we went to Zürich, we met Hysen Gërvalla there, he said, “Will you take me?” We took him as well, and got on the plane and Din Derdi... when we landed in Tirana, Din Derdi got off the plane and kissed the ground. When we all landed, we kissed the ground, too. So, they had come to greet us with Mercedes. During that time, the government must have had about ten second-hand Mercedes cars, but in a good condition. They came out in Mercedes, they picked us up, and they sent us to the Dajti Hotel, while they put Tom Lantos and DioGuardi and his staff in Enver Hoxha’s villas.

So, the following day we met, we got together with the group and we started going for visits. For example, we headed to Kruja, in Berat they gave us dinner and what not. But in the end, to make a long story short, it came to the point, we finished those visits and were split into two delegation groups. One group went to Ramiz Alia’s, the other group, Bruno, Rexhë Xhakli and I went to Nexhmije Hoxha’s,⁴⁵ to where Enver Hoxha’s house used to be. To tell you the truth, we were a bit... we were happy, we wanted the support of the Albanian state, and it seemed that it was a great honor for us. We arrived and they appointed me as a something like a leader of the group that went to Nexhmije Hoxha’s. We went there, they served us some sweets, they served us some coffee, no one was there, just one person with a camera {shows with hands}, with a camera to take a picture of us. We started a conversation, we explained that the goal of our visit was to establish relations as soon as possible with the United States of America. It’s a mutual interest, it is of great interest especially for Kosovo, because Kosovo is occupied.

And now Nexhmije started saying, “Look, these are, Enver has always loved Kosovo a lot.” I said, “We loved Enver too, we loved Albania (laughs). But now is a different time.” In other words, we could not directly tell her, but we wanted to tell her that communism, ideology is fading, it is, it is nothing anymore. Let’s establish a relationship as soon as possible with the United States of America. So she said, “Yes, we have begun some reforms as well, some reforms for a while now. We will most likely do them, the youth wants to read novels from the West and America. We will most likely open the borders more. You remember

⁴⁴ Ramiz Alia (1925-2011), successor of Enver Hoxha, the last Communist leader of Albania and the First democratic President (1991-92).

⁴⁵ Enver Hoxha’s wife.

when we broke with the Soviet Union, the other things that followed. The neighboring countries isolated us, instead of supporting us, they isolated us even more, and so on.”

In my opinion, on that visit they gave the message that little by little they were thinking of leaving that isolation, that ideology. And finally we got back, we took some pictures, I have some pictures that I can show you if needed. And so then we went to the University of Tirana, with Tom Lantos and the whole group that was there. When we went there, they had prepped a girl, a very beautiful, young girl. She knew English very well and asked the Congressman, “Mr. Congressman,” she said, “Let me ask you a question.” “Please,” he says. “Are you maybe showing us a flower in the front, and a knife in the back?” Now, this was a bit of a provocative question, and Tom Lantos looked, he looked at us, as if to ask what is this question about. We signaled to him that we would explain later. So, the late Tom Lantos provided a beautiful answer. He said, “Miss, if you establish relations with the United States of America, there will be flowers in the front, and there will be flowers in the back. But do you know what is required of you? You need to water those flowers” (laughs). And it’s very interesting...

Then, from there we said, let us explain to Tom Lantos our way of thinking so that he isn’t offended because they [Albanians] were under China, they were with Russia, they’ve been with Yugoslavia as well in the past. They are sick of it and now they don’t trust anyone (laughs). And then we went to King Zog’s Villa, the King Zog. They treated us to a very good lunch, I met with a friend of mine that I had not seen in a very long time, he passed away some time ago now [inc.]. And then we hit the road, they saw us off, they gave us a suitcase with books, Enver Hoxha’s books, they gave Tom Lantos two tambourines, two tambourines, they called them *dajre*, we call them *defa*. So, when we went to the airport, they gave him two... to him, he was holding them like this {makes a fist}, it seemed to me like something, something with both tambourines in each hand. I went to take them from him and the Congressmen said to Tom Lantos, “Look these are antique pieces, they are interesting, we value them greatly.” “Do you value them? Would you like me to give them to you?” I just wanted to take them off his hands. And so on... That visit ended, and then afterwards, we all know, it wasn’t too much longer before the government crumbled.

For instance, I remember when the Americans used to ask us, often in my restaurants they would say, “What does Albania look like? What does Albania look like?” In fact, that is what we were told. We would tell them, “Albania is like a flower park, and if you throw something bad on the street...” “Ah,” he would say, “You should be proud of it.” Afterwards, when Albania fell, people from different embassies came to comfort me, those people to whom I said that Albania is like a flower park. And...

Sylejman Gashi: A delegation came during the blood feuds reconciliation action⁴⁶ in Kosovo and America in 1990? Do you have memories from that visit?

⁴⁶ In 1991 a mass movement for the forgiveness of blood feuds (*pajtimi i gjakut*), was launched among the Albanian population of Kosovo. It was initiated by a group of students, former political prisoners, who approached folklore scholar Anton Çetta and others seniors figures in academia to lead the process. The movement reconciled thousands of cases, and it became a movement for national unity.

Shaqir Gashi: That blood reconciliation delegation is very interesting and with Anton Çetta⁴⁷ leading it, many people came. Mark Krasniqi,⁴⁸ Anton Çetta, there was a guy, Luka from Peja, Azem Shkreli and that... there were some others whose names I can't remember no, we went and met them at the airport, we picked them up at the airport and we brought them to my restaurant. We treated them to dinner, all Albanians came as many as they were [inc.] and so on. I remember Bajram Kelmendi,⁴⁹ a long time ago, I remember a detail about him. So, we reconciled I don't know how many blood feuds here with Anton Çetta in the lead.

And when we finished all that work, I am telling you a detail, we Albanians, the Diaspora, we were prepared to give each a token [contribution], five to six hundred dollars for the trip and expenses. And we were giving that to everyone for the trip, and I took those five hundred dollars and gave them to Bajram Kelmendi. Bajram Kelmendi did not say anything, he said, "Thank you." When I went to the airport, he took the money out and gave it back to me. He said, "See Gashi, I don't know if this is your money, or someone else's, but thank you, I don't need money." He said, "Return this money, you welcomed us, treated us well." So it was a good memory, I remember that he returned the money, he didn't want to take it. You see, he was a good man, during the war he lost his sons, he lost himself, he lost everything, it was terribly sad!

Sylejman Gashi: Today you have approached the age of 80, what do you do today? Are you retired or are you still active?

Shaqir Gashi: Look, to tell you the truth I was not... I never did hard work, I worked in a restaurant. Again, I keep busy with something, now my son and my son-in-law, they have opened a very good restaurant in the center of Manhattan. I have two daughters, I have Drenusha, I have Iliriana, I have Kushtrime, they all graduated from university, they are working, one in business, one in a bank, one in political sciences. Therefore, I am very happy with my family, and we live a normal life, and to tell you the truth, I was never so dedicated to work to become a millionaire.

But I had the goal that my restaurants, I don't know how many there are, there are about twenty-some-odd that I opened. My goal was to give them to other Albanians, to make more Albanians business owners. So, the restaurants of those times were like ambassadors and we achieved that goal. And now, for example, my message would be, something that I am mostly concerned with, that for example Albanians go back to the solidarity they had before the war and during the war, to love each-other, to support each-other. Now the Albanian Diaspora, in my opinion, did some hard work, the Diaspora put its heart and soul in completing the work that needed be done. Now I don't think that the Diaspora will be

⁴⁷ Anton Çetta (1920-1995), folklore scholar.

⁴⁸ Mark Krasniqi (1920-2015), ethnographer and writer.

⁴⁹ Bajram Kelmendi (1947-1999) was an Albanian lawyer and human rights activist, he was assassinated by Serbian police on the first day of the NATO bombing together with his two sons, Kastriot and Kushtrim.

very important for political relationships. Now we have nothing to tell anyone, Kosovo is independent, has its own institutions, it has its own challenges.

Look, I just remembered about us, the Diaspora, maybe it's not fair to say it, but I remember an example, for instance when our daughters got married, they would go to their husband's and when they came to visit the family, they used to say, "We are going to the *opçinë*."⁵⁰ And when they came to the *opçinë*, they would bring us cakes (smiles). And now I would say, instead of the Diaspora going to visit Albania, they should not just go, but also invest when they have the opportunity, and instead of the cake, Albanian Diaspora has the obligation to invest and send as much money as possible.

Sylejman Gashi: Do you visit Kosovo?

Shaqir Gashi: Yes, I do, once a year, every second, third year I go. To tell you the truth, I was born as an Albanian and I want to die as an Albanian.

⁵⁰ *Opçinë*, originally from Serbian *Općina*, is a term denoting the municipality, or a local community.