

Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH ZAHRIJE PODRIMQAKU

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Duration: 302 minutes

Present:

1. Zahrije Podrimqaku (Speaker)
2. Jeta Rexha (Interviewer)
3. Donjeta Berisha (Camera/Interviewer)
4. Kaltrina Krasniqi (Camera/Interviewer)

Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:

() - emotional communication

{ } - the speaker explains something using gestures

Other transcription conventions:

[] - addition to the text to facilitate comprehension

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

Childhood

[Cut from the video-interview: the interviewer asks the speaker about her childhood.]

Zahrije Podrimqaku: I was born on February 10, 1970, in the village of Krajkova. I belong to a large, hardworking family and one that is well known for its hospitality and patriotism. My family in Drenica was a large family, made of around 30 family members. From the 21 children that he had (laughs), my grandfather, you know, had 16 alive. Of them, seven were boys and the rest were girls.

As a child I, I started elementary school in my place of birth, my first teacher was Bedrie Hoxha, whom I take the opportunity to greet because she was a very good teacher, she taught us well and educated us well. Until fourth grade, I mean, I finished elementary school there, then with my family when, when we separated from the family we lived with, we left for Drenas around the year '82 and from fifth grade I started going to the school that today is called Rasim Keqina in Drenas, until eighth grade. During my education, I mean from first grade until fifth grade I was an excellent student, then by...with my engagements at home as well, because we were a large family and I was the oldest child, my parent worked abroad, meaning in Zagreb company at that time and I had to commit to my family from a young age.

I remember at that time as a student, in sixth grade, my mother made me a jumper that at that time was the cigarette packets, I mean, filters, *Bozhur* is what the cigarettes were called, *Bozhur*. Students at that time spelled the word *Bozhur*, "*Bashkohuni o Zhugana, Urra Republikë*" [Unite, you people with scabies [people close to Yugoslavia], viva the Republica]. And the word filter, you know, "*Fadili i Lutet Titos Epna Republikë*" [Fadil¹ Begs Tito to Give Us a Republic]. So I initially received from my mother the love for the homeland, for contributing to the homeland, when she told me the story of her grandfather (laughs), like, Habib Ukiqi, who at that time knew seven foreign languages and was a bodyguard for Hasan Prishtina² and whom Hasan Prishtina also had as an

¹ Fadil Hoxha (1916-2001), Albanian Communist partisan leader from Gjakova, who held a number of high posts in Kosovo and Yugoslavia, including the rotating post of Vice President of the Federal Presidency, the highest leadership post in Yugoslavia under Tito, in 1978-79. He retired in 1986, but was expelled from the League of Communist on charges of nationalism.

² Hasan Prishtina (1873-1933) was an Albanian politician, known as Hasan Berisha before he became the Prishtina delegate to the Ottoman Parliament. He led the 1912 uprising in Kosovo against the Young Turks and after the declaration of

advisor, and a bodyguard and a translator. And it is written in books by Mehmet Rukiqi, he talks of one incident when they were travelling, Hasan Prishtina was a deputy in the Turkish Parliament, and he says that through a mirror he saved Hasan Prishtina from an assassination attempt in Thessaloniki.

And from these stories that my mother told about her grandfather at that time, that at the end of his life, at the end, UDBA³ followed him, I mean, the enemy, the power at that time, he went to Albania and to this day his grave is in Kukës. Also, my uncle was a political prisoner, Bajrush. As a student in the sixth-seventh grade from him, I kept a flag with an eagle that *Vetëvendosja* now keeps (laughs), I held it at that time. And I loved national symbols with great curiosity.

I remember an incident, a certain Shazije Sopi had an ice-cream shop and I went to her shop, then when she saw the eagle stuck to my chest, she asked me to give it to her. And I said, “I can’t give it to you because my uncle gave it to me.” She was persistent in wanting to take my eagle. At some point, she started offering me, “Here’s one thousand red Dinars.” They were with red horses then, “Here’s two thousand, here’s three thousand.” I said, “Oh it’s pointless because even if you give me the whole shop, I won’t give you the eagle, because the flag can’t be sold” (laughs).

So the curiosity and love I had to contribute to the fatherland, I had them from my family. And at the family of my great-grandfather, during the ‘50s, ‘55, my great-grandfather at that time lent the *oda*⁴ completely because they were a wealthy family, because they worked, a hardworking family. And he left the *oda*, the teachers who taught in Krajkova at that time, such as Mehmet Rukiqi, Jusuf Rukiqi, I mean, they ate, they drank, they slept like they were with their own families and they taught in the village there, when education was organized there for the first time, I mean, with courses during those years. They also gave a great contribution, apart from ensuring the teachers free accommodation, also the construction of the first school in Krajkova during the years ‘50-‘55 when the first school was built in Krajkova, through labor, you know, my grandfather helped with the construction of the school.

Also, I need to also mention here, I finished high school at the Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu high school. I was a child who had determination and endurance, simply put, my mother said, “You were always stubborn, you never let go when you knew you were in the right” (laughs). And that was my childhood at that time, that even today my mother mentions, she says, “When you had to act and perform a task, you were always determined.”

We were seven children, four sisters and three brothers. I was the oldest of all the other children. The village was good, I mean, it was an average life because at the time there were large families, all the families lived [together], not with families separated like today with nuclear families, but all the families lived with their extended families because social life [was organized] in that way, I mean, in order to contribute towards the

independence of Albania he held several posts in the Albanian government including the one of Prime Minister. He was assassinated in Thessaloniki on the orders of King Zog.

³ UDB, *Uprava državne bezbednosti* (State Security Administration).

⁴ Men’s chamber in traditional Albanian society.

families and the education of children together, because there weren't...employment wasn't for everyone. For example, one employed person had to support all the families at that time.

I remember when...because we, my great-grandfather had many sheep, somewhere around 150 heads of sheep and 30 cows. As far as our family economy went, we were an average family that didn't have social problems like others for example, because my family was hardworking. And when...at the age, I mean, until four years old I watched over the sheep at that time, together with neighborhood friends there, someone took flour with themselves, someone oil, someone cream, he things we had at home, and we cooked, I mean, we prepared food in the mountains.

And I remember a case, an old man from Vuçak came on a horse through the mountain, from Negrovc to Krajkova and to Drenas. And I don't remember his name, and on one occasion he came and found the food we had prepared before we ate. He said, "I swear, *axhi* is hungry, I'll eat it, but you cook again because you know how to cook well," and he took part of the food that we had prepared. And that person, in the '81 protests, now, when I happened [to work with] the son, to work with a close relative of my family at the Municipal Council for Financing with Berat Shala, when I told him this incident he told me that, "He is my uncle, Zahrije." And that person [came] to the protests with a horse, they gave him a flag in his hand and they sent him to the Assembly from the high school, I mean, he took part in the protests, that old man. And I remember this incident well, when he met us in the Mountains and he asked for a part of our food and we gave it to him.

I had the greatest closeness with my parents, because my grandmother also supported me, and my grandfather supported me. Usually in the *oda*, out of all us children who were in that crowd of children, I was the most well-received in the *oda* with the men. And from the *oda* of Drenica we can specify moments when we come to my activism, during my activities I went into *oda*, but I was more welcomed to enter and serve in the *oda* of my great-grandfather. And this is the reason why my grandfather accepted me in the *oda* out of all the other children because there was never an occasion for a child to stay in the *oda*. For example, the great-grandfather [on the side] of my maternal uncles would come, while you greeted them, you stayed with them a bit, and then you had to leave right away, I mean, from the *oda* go home, because children weren't in the men's *oda*, children and women weren't accepted.

In the *oda* there was discipline, there were rules the, like, when the man of the house spoke or when the guest was given a turn to speak he was listened to until the end, there were rules.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: This was an environment specifically for men?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: Yes, this was an environment specifically for men. At that time and in families even food for men was prepared separately and there were occasions when women, for example, prepared the food and didn't eat it themselves. They just smelled its aroma (laughs).

Activism

[Cut from video-interview: the interviewer asks the speaker about her life as an activist.]

Zahrije Podrimqaku: When I went to high school, you know, we had a closeness with friends, with male and female friends, we respected each other. I mean, we listened to each other, we supported each other and we were more closely tied than are students today.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Where did you go to high school?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: The gymnasium.⁵

Kaltrina Krasniqi: In which city? In which place?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: In Drenas, I finished high school here in Drenas, but apart from schooling I also had family obligations, because I was the oldest child, my father worked in this enterprise, it was called Zagreb ...at the time, of Zagreb. So, there was work in the field, in different cities, he was almost always far from home, then in the end he came to Obiliq. However, I dealt with household obligations and the household budget, I dealt with the household economy since sixth grade.

So, during high school I participated in protests, at the time we showed solidarity with the miners of Trepça. On February 20, 1989, I was a student in the third, or the fourth year, I remember that I took part in those protests. In '89, on February 20, '89, the protest of the miners took place. When the miners entered the cave, we showed solidarity with them and I took part in those protests. Also, I took part in the protests that happened on January 31 in the year 1990 in Drenas, here at the train tracks, where three people were killed and around 26 people, as far as I remember, were wounded at the time. My activities, for example, and my engagement then, in the '90s I was engaged with the Women's Forum of the Democratic League for the first time. I was chosen as the leader of the women, at the time the meetings were held at the family's of Hysen Elshani, where it was close for us, because at the time we only held meetings among families, or meetings in schools that were free, that we had the opportunity to use.

In my political activities, apart from protests, I took part in the protests as a student, I started in the '90s, I said it already. I mentioned earlier that when she was the head of the Women's Forum, Vahide Ibrixhi, an Albanian language professor...she came and asked, because in every village she created leadership, or for example, in every sub-branch she asked thoroughly about the families, in order to engage the girls who come from big families, girls who are well behaved and hard working. And when she asked in my neighborhood, the neighbors directed her to me and said, "If you want a hard worker, someone who works, and a well behaved girl," they said, "there's Zahrije here." They told her my name and professor Vahide came directly to my family's, to my father. She came to me, and I said, "Without asking father, I can't." Then she came to my family's in the evening and asked father, she said to him, "You have to give me your daughter, because they told me good things about your daughter. And I asked everywhere in this community, you know, I'm interested in engaging her in political

⁵ A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

activities.” Since then, it was called the Democratic Movement (LDK),⁶ I mean, the whole nation was there, they were in support of this movement. And my father said, “I,” he said, “Zahrije, she has now finished high school and has enrolled in the university in Peja. But I didn’t have the means to send her to school, because of the current situation, for students...” At the time they were in basements, where [classes] were held in houses. “The situation is such and my travel is far, a big family, I have an obligation to my brothers to build them houses.”

My father was the oldest in the family and had to contribute to his own family, to build houses for all his brothers as he would for himself. And this is why we moved to Drenas at the time and he financed and invested his economy until he built houses for all the brothers, all of them. And he said, “I won’t obstruct her, I’m worried about high school, but about activities, I won’t obstruct her, let her judge for herself. First, she should know that contributing to the nation is good, but it’s also dangerous. Let her decide for herself if she can handle it, this young girl, she could be jailed, if she can handle violence.” Then my father said, “Hey, the police, prison, she could die, she even, she may even remain a maid because of the contribution she gives, she’ll have to go into families’ homes and villages.” He said, “She could also end up unmarried because people’s mentality is backward, because of her engagement, because she’s very hardworking and her engagement makes her...let her evaluate all this. I would like to give her a deadline.” He said, “If she can endure this, then she’ll give you an answer.” And the next day I went to the office, to the professor, and I said that I’m ready to get involved in political activity to serve my people, since my parent also gave me permission.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What kind of activity was it?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: The activity at the time was a broad activity of great importance for our country. After the meeting was held, you know, I gathered the girls who were educated and were my age and older, all of them. And from there I, you know, I was supported by the people, they elected me the head of the women of the Democratic Movement of the time. And we held regular meetings with women in neighborhoods, in *oda*,⁷ we took advantage of weddings at the time. And of main importance at the time, we registered the population in the village, Çikatova e Re, where I was the head of the Women’s Forum for women at the time, during the ‘90s. We knew the exact situation at the time, how many residents the village had, how many were women, how many were men, how many children. I mean, we registered all the boys at the time, how many males were soldiers, because it’s known that at the time Serbia killed young men soldiers in different ways. And they blamed them by saying, “No, he committed suicide,” “No this, no that,” and all the youths came back in coffins.

There were many cases mostly in Drenica and this case, then we held meetings with people, we spread propaganda for no family to send their son to the army any more. We held meetings with women as well, and we advised women and girls not to get into early marriages, not to marry girls without their consent, and to remove

⁶ Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës (LDK) - Democratic League of Kosovo. First political party of Kosovo, founded in 1989, when the autonomy of Kosovo was revoked, by a group of journalists and intellectuals. The LDK quickly became a party-state, gathering all Albanians, and remained the only party until 1999.

⁷ Men’s chamber in traditional Albanian society.

backward customs at the time for girls, women. When they married, for example, not to make requests that would economically harm the family, not to buy gold, as they bought in the past, or to make a dowry, the dowry the girls worked on. You know, when a bride was taken [by the broom], almost her entire family was economically weakened, it was weakened when a bride was taken. And at the time, in every meeting with women and with girls that we held, we advised them not to ask to buy gold. A ring is enough, a necklace, a pair of earrings, but not to buy gold like they did in earlier times. Removing backward customs in clothing for brides, for example, not to have the bride [kiss] hands, because these aren't our customs, these are customs from the time the Turks ruled here in Kosovo. Not to buy twelve meters of *dimia*⁸ anymore, like they did before, buy twelve meters of *dimia*, a gold vest, and chains, and a two-meter-long *qystek*,⁹ as they were called at the time. I mean, I've also forgotten them myself, on all these issues we worked endlessly with people to improve them and have them go and live a more progressive life.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Did people accept these [changes]?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: Yes, they accepted them. During the time when I was the head of the Women's Forum in my village, professor Vahide was at the sub-branch and Flora Brovina was at the central level, the head of the Democratic Movement for women at the time. One day, because some documentation of mine survived the war and I had minutes, in '91 I even organized a meeting for doctor Flora Brovina... We took advantage of women's days as well at the time, I mean, women's days such as the Mondays of weedings, we used women's days. There we found women, we found girls there to talk to about everything, about the education of girls.

I helped many girls with their schooling at the time when their parents stopped them. We reconciled families, disputes, we advised women not to cause them, because a woman has the greater role in the family, she's the pillar of the family. And she can play an important role in [ensuring] that disputes don't happen, at the time, to avoid disagreements, eliminate disagreements, not to have it come to the killing of a brother, there were many brothers' killings at the time. Then there was revenge between families, if a situation of this sort arises, then the family takes revenge on the [other] family because of it. We worked very hard in this direction. I had the opportunity to reconcile many families in *oda*, the village and men and women supported me, they supported me a lot.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What were usually the problems?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: Well, problems, either about land boundaries, or other things, usually property, Most were about property, or about girls, or if girls had problems with their husband's family, and here placed also in the context of problems in a family, among friends. And this is why it was very important for women to play their role as the pillar of the family, I mean, as the organizer of the family to create as good a life as possible for their

⁸ *Dimia* - billowing white satin pantaloons that narrow at the ankles, Turkish style. They are made with about twelve meters of fabric.

⁹ Pocket watch with a long gold chain.

family and to raise both daughters and sons with better education, and to eliminate the old customs that were in Albanian families before.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Did you have problems in developing that political activity? The LDK at the time was an illegal organization?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: Yes, it was a problem, because the police, if one were to encounter the police they would arrest you and take you for an informative interview. *Besa, besa*,¹⁰ there was also physical abuse, everything. Then, alongside my activities in this movement I was chosen to the leadership of the branch in Drenas later on, because of my activities. In '92 I also have an acknowledgement there that I can show you. And at that time I was awarded with an acknowledgement, I was the most committed activist. I mean, I was a hard worker and did never-ending activities, I always never stopped in the village I lived in, here in Çikatova e Re which is now called Drenasi Tre.

Alongside this, the Council for the Protection of Rights¹¹ heard my voice and that I was active, when I take on work, I take it on with responsibility. Shaban Shala came to my family's, he's now dead, I regret that he left life very early. We worked together at that time and he got me engaged in the Council for the Defense of Rights. And in the Council for the Defense of Rights, I was initially engaged there as a Council associate. Then, with my work I quickly joined the leadership of the Council of Drenas, where Agim Vrallaku was, at the time, the chairman of the Council. So, Shaban Shala was the vice-chairman, there were other activists, Gëzim Sheshani, there was Ibrahim Hajdari, there was...

The Council had its own activities in all villages, and in the villages it had its own activists. If not two, if not three, depending on how the village was, more. Because then there was a great repression of the Albanian population, mostly in Drenica, where families were mistreated, they were raided. We had to go to each family's home and get a statement, take photos of the case if they were mistreated and right away give... I mean, right away give an interview in Pristina, to inform the inner structures of the Council, as well as the Committee for Information of the Democratic Movement at the time.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: For you was it, during this time you were very young, was it problematic for you to be engaged in this activity?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: Yes, it was problematic, because I was a young girl and at that time there were a few young girls, even though when the Leadership was created, for example, many girls were engaged in that Leadership. And I was the head of that Leadership, however, slowly each one left their job and the women were eliminated, they'd either get married, or they'd find the work difficult, or... nevertheless, I didn't know how to give up

¹⁰ 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. But in this particular context when it's used twice it translates into "as a matter of fact." As such the speaker establishes a line of trust, ensuring that what is being said is the absolute truth.

¹¹ The full name of this organization is Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedom. KMLDNJ is the Albanian acronym.

because I took it on with responsibility and I wanted, simply, work, be active. I really wanted to contribute to my people, and all the challenges I had and worries and problems as a young girl at the time, I mean, they couldn't stop me or discourage me from my activities.

Life in Drenica, for the entire population, the economic situation was poor. Overall, I can say it was poor, because unemployment was high. You know, people had all been fired from their jobs, the Feronikel Factory, the Poultry Factory here, the Tailoring Factory, I mean Kluzi, at that time it was, the OP-Drenica workers, as they were called at the time, and everyone at the time was supported by...they had help from the *Nëna Tereze*¹² society, at that time they were helped. There was solidarity aid from emigrants abroad who sent money, and also sent goods, because at that time, now, for example, I can mention, we and the Gynecology Hospital, even though most of the time they were Albanian, violent measures came late to the hospital. But I remember when at the time, through... people who had businesses, enterprises, helped a lot, private businesses, where we collected, where we collected detergent for the hospital, slippers, robes for women who gave birth in the hospital. We got resources there to buy drugs and we helped the hospital at the time directly as the Women's Forum. [We helped] even the wife of doctor Ibrahim Rugova give birth to this young girl who's now a member of Parliament, she was born at that time in Drenas.¹³

And the people were mostly involved in farming, because everyone was fired from their jobs. We also registered the number of people who were removed from their jobs at the time. Education was supported by self-financing, because I was part, I mean, I was also involved in the Municipal Committee for Financing, where I also collected the wages of educational workers at the time.

But the abuses here were great, because there was a greater amount of repression from the Serbian police in Drenica. Because Drenica even in earlier wars is known as a region that didn't endure, you know, submission. It isn't...a people that never submitted to the enemy, and because of this, Serbia always had more of an eye on Drenica. And there was fear, basically, I can say in most of Drenica at the time. We, in the Council, did a lot of work at the time. There was a case in which guerrilla groups, I mean, of the army [Kosovo Liberation Army], that did the attack, here at the train tracks, where police were killed at the time, I remember it was around 10:30, at night.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: The date?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: The date, the time, and now I'll tell you the date because I started, because time has passed and...The first case, for example, in which an attack was conducted, was done on September 27, '92 at the bus station, they were killed there, they were killed, or they were wounded. One police officer was killed, another was wounded, I don't remember the case well, and with this case the police immediately conducted its own action in which it raided families in Çikatova e Re, in Krajkova, and so on and abused many people at the time. And the engagement had to be very high, because one had to go and get, apart from information, take

¹² Mother Teresa, the self-help organization that during the 1990s, at the height of Milošević's repression, supported the parallel society of Albanians, expelled from all state institutions and services.

¹³ Teuta Rugova.

photos of the person, develop the photos and submit all this to the Council for the Defense of Rights, at that time the head of the Council was Adem Demaçi.¹⁴ And other members of the leadership was also Shaban Shala, who was a member of the leadership at the time in the Central Committee. There was Sami Kurteshi, there was Shukrije Gashi,¹⁵ from the women, we had with Shukrije a very, very good cooperation.

And so, we then created a file. Every delegation that came and visited the Council, we had material and we had photos of cases that had happened, of beatings and frequent physical abuse of family members at the time, who were raided in their homes to collect weapons. Families, even if they [Serbian authorities] heard that some from their family was engaged also in the underground, I mean, was active to contribute to their people, they tracked them down. They also had their own people, it's known, because even with us, our activity was difficult because not all families accepted it. Not all the families accepted us, either to shelter material, or...I myself, as an activist, had to hold all the Council material and that of the Council for Financing and the Council for the Defense of Rights, I had to keep them in my family's home and keep them safe.

The case of the second attack in Drenas, after the attack of '92, was on May 23, 1993, at the train tracks. In this case, which happened at around 22:30, at night, I heard the shots right away and the police forces came from...from Mitrovica and from Pristina. And police forces filled up [the space], there were around 1500 police officers at the time. Every person who encountered them, who didn't know about the incident that had then taken place, was abused at the time, was forced to lay on the ground, they kicked people, because one had to...I followed the case right away, right away when the case happened at that time, this case was very severe, and I informed *bac*¹⁶ Adem. I informed Fehmi Agani¹⁷ at the time, who was a member of the leadership, Xhemail Mustafa¹⁸ was a member of the committee. When the case happened, just for it to be heard and become, you know, for the news to spread as quickly as possible, one had to inform all the people, who knew where the key places were. We had phone numbers, I didn't have a phone in my home, but I either used it at the neighbor's or whoever had a phone, I would go to them and request the phone and gave the information.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Who conducted these attacks?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: The Serbian police, ah, at the time the people didn't know it existed, you know, we activists had a bit of knowledge, we knew about the activities of the Kosovo Liberation Army back then at that time.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: So, these attacks in '92, '93, were they...?

¹⁴ Adem Demaçi (1936-) is 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.

¹⁵ Shukrije Gashi's interview can be found on this website.

¹⁶ *Bac*, literally uncle, is an endearing and respectful term for an older person.

¹⁷ Fehmi Agani (1932-1999) was a philosopher, sociologist and politician, one of the founders of the Democratic League of Kosovo. He was assassinated by Serbian troops as he attempted to flee Pristina disguised as a woman to avoid detection.

¹⁸ Xhemail Mustafa (1953-2000), was a journalist and adviser to President Ibrahim Rugova. He was gunned down in front of his house by unknown killers in 2000.

Zahrije Podrimqaku: Now it's clearly known, for example, that the attack on the bus station, at the time, was conducted by Adem Jashari,¹⁹ Hashim Thaçi,²⁰ Ramiz Lladrovci²¹ who today is...and other participants. And the police, early in the morning, apart from all night that it...people from all sides were abused, whom they encountered, you know, where the roundabout is here today in Drenas, *ryqi* as it was called at the time. The Serbian police checkpoint was placed in the middle of the center of Drenas, then. There was no other road to pass by, the roads were connected there and every person who was abused in the early morning, because that night, all night I was informing, I mean, talking directly with Pristina, because phones in Drenas... I tried to inform my head of the Women's Forum here, Vahide Ibrixhi, who was a woman and could never get a phone here. But in Pristina you could get it easier, and here they cut the telephone connections in Drenas, but information was carried to Pristina.

And that night, I followed the case all night, I mean, I was awake in my house and prepared the material. I sheltered the material of the Council for the Protection of Rights, materials from the Municipal Council for Financing, because the offices at the time also belonged to the Municipal Council for Financing and the Council for the Protection of Rights and the Council for Education - you know, all the parallel institutions at the time, which functioned under the power of Serbia, that we worked in for our people, they for their state - all the offices were, they were in my paternal uncle's house, where Shaqir Podrimqaku is now living. This was after they took our offices that we had at the BVI Council [The Self-Governing Association of Interest] of Education that was there, which was called at the time the former BVI of education, since they took it away from us. And since I was an activist myself, I proposed my uncle's house and in this way all of the offices were in my uncle's house. And my house was near and out of fear of being raided, that they would open up the office there, I took all of the material and sheltered it. Now early in the morning, at 7, Drenas was filled with police officers.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: This was in '93?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: In '93, when this case happened at the train tracks they were so prepared, around over 1500 police officers were all in bulletproof vests, they were armed to the teeth, the Serbs. They had a great number of forces at the time, and they came for a surprise raid. I had two younger brothers at the time, Martir and Rilind. And I had stuffed all the material in the couch, in the bed, and I put my brothers to bed, and I said, I spoke to mother, I said, "Mother, please don't let them, for the sake of the children, let them, the children, be on obstruction, to prevent them from finding the material. Then they could arrest me and they could beat father."

They went through Çikatova e Re systematically, when that day they raided 114 families. And after they entered in my family's house, they tried to break the door of the *oda*, where I had all the photos. It was called the men's

¹⁹ Adem Jashari (1955-1998), also known as "legendary commander," was a founder of the KLA celebrated as its foremost leader and symbol of Kosovo independence. He died in March 1998, together with his family of twenty - half of them underage girls and boys - in a shootout with Serb troops during a three-day siege of his home in Prekaz.

²⁰ Hashim Thaçi (1968-), KLA leader at the 1999 Conference of Rambouillet, founder and leader of the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), served as Prime Minister several times and in 2016 was elected President of Kosovo.

²¹ Former KLA fighter and at the time of the interview Ambassador of the Republic of Kosovo in Albania.

oda at the time, all the photos of all the heroes, from Isa Boletini,²² in order, Ismail Qemali,²³ Skënderbeg, I had put them up all on the wall, they were all framed. He tried to hit the door and mother yelled at the police officer, “I’ll bring the key now and open the door,” she said, “but please, I beg you, don’t break the door!” She yelled in a very high tone of voice to the police officer, and he hit the door and broke it. And he took all the frames, he broke them by throwing them to the ground, he said, “You’re keeping terrorists here.”

After the raid in the house, all done, when they went to the room, to my mother, they tried to approach the children and my mother said to them, “Do you have children?” When she mentioned it, “Do you have children?” she said, “If possible,” she said, “don’t you see that the boys are sleeping there?” She said, “Check there wherever you want, but don’t wake up my sons!” And they were afraid, the children. And they protected [the material], and it did not matter that they were not asleep. But they stayed put, and mother approached them, then the police didn’t touch the couch, that’s how the material of the Council was saved from there. The moment they finished the entire search, what’s in the clothes, the dishes in the kitchen, they checked everything, they put everything on the ground, the clothes, everything they found there in the house. And when they finished with my family, then they went to the neighbor’s. My father didn’t happen to be there. With his brother they happened to be at their maternal uncle’s.

And in the neighborhood there were men, because where they found men, they took the men, they searched them. After the search they put them in their cars, in the small army tanks, to take them to the police station where they took everyone. And the moment the neighbors close by, when they lined up the men of the neighbors, the Elshani family there, I took the camera and at the time I photographed them with their hands up against the wall. In this case and now after the war a son of theirs, Afrim, mentioned me, he said, “Zahrije, good job. You also,” he said, “were a devil.” He said, “What courage you had. When I saw you,” he said, “we were up against the wall,” he said, “when I saw you with a camera in your hand, I almost went insane. Now,” he said, “they’ll see her camera and they can kill us or, who knows what they can do to us.” I had the courage, simply put.

But as soon as they finished with their family, thinking that they had finished with the other families, the family in front of us, the family of Muharrem Elshani had a phone at the time. And now I [had to] inform Shukrije [Gashi] at the Council there, in the Council for the Protection of Rights on what the police were doing, how they were searching and what they were doing by taking away men, because they took men, now I saw that they took men from every family and I went to inform [the Council] on the phone. The neighbor with his wife wasn’t there, he had only two girls at home and they were still searching the family in the attic. And I went into the house and when I got in I picked up the phone, I remember when his daughter said to me, “*Dada*²⁴ Zahrie, sit,

²² 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. His remains, originally buried in Podgorica where he was killed, were reburied in the village of Boletin, in the northern side of Mitrovica, in June 2015.

²³ Ismail Qemal Bej Vlora (1844-1919), better known as Ismail Qemali, Ottoman civil servant and prominent politician, a leader of the Albanian national movement and a main figure in the Declaration of Albanian Independence in 1912.

²⁴ The older sister is usually called *dadë/dada*, or a respectful term for someone a little older.

sit, sit, because the police are in the attic. Don't, don't dare talk on the phone because they'll hear you." And I put down the phone for a moment until they left. In this way, the whole search happened, they finished the search, I visited families soon after.

I remember when I went to the family of Ejup Hasi, he had many sons, I don't remember whether he had seven or eight, but I know he had many, they were a big family. And the wife of uncle Ejup was fainting, "They took my sons and they're going to kill them." Because when they came in, they asked who killed the police. "Do you know who killed the police?" Because the minivan was full of police, it was completely destroyed from bullets. People were even saying at the time, they said that they had been brought from Bosnia just to set up the incident. However, the incident was (laughs) true, you know, it was a direct attack by the Kosovo Liberation Army, the guerilla groups at the time, who were underground and at the time operated as guerilla groups. And I said to that wife of *axhi*²⁵ Ejup, "Oy *dada* Leme," I said, "don't worry and calm down." I said and I helped her refresh, because she had fainted. And when I said to her, I said, "Because they haven't only taken your sons, they've also taken [men] from every home they entered, they took all the men." They took boys, even a twelve year old called Burim Deliu, whom I remember at the time was also taken to the police station.

They released all the men in the evening, at around five, they didn't release them until then and they beat them. They said that at that time blood was spilled, the walls of the police station were all bloody, such great abuses occurred in Drenas, that when people were released at that time from the station, they then had broken ribs, or damaged parts of their bodies, they were beaten that badly. And so I [went] house to house, where they did the raids, I went and got the information of all the men with their names, whom they had arrested, who was pillaged, someone [had] 500 Euros [taken], because they had found their money. I swear the necklaces women had with lira, in old times that had nine lira pieces, they took them, gold, they took everything they found in those homes. I registered all of this that morning, the moment when the field activists, Shaban Shala, Agim Llaku, Jakup Krasniqi, came directly to the people, after we went through them in order, I had everything ready.

There was this journalist at that time, Hamide Latifi and Zeqir Bekolli. I remember all the data, because we didn't have an office, and all the activists were in my family at the time, and...by year of birth, how many were taken, how many families were raided, all the information... I was the first to spread the news about this incident. But my family was my support (laughs with tears in her eyes), they supported me. My mother and father and sisters supported me a lot. I carry a great debt to my family because I often caused them problems and sent friends there, my mother never hesitated to prepare food, my sisters never hesitated, they took very good care of me (cries), I'm sorry.

After a time I had to, after people were released from the police station, a doctor had to be sent to all their houses and among the doctors there was only doctor Hafir Shala, who today is missing (wipes away tears and swallows)...who helped people (speaks with heavy breathing) with drugs and with everything together. With Shaban Shala they brought Doctors without Borders from Pristina and we went to all the families, we distributed drugs to all the people who were abused in the [police] station at the time.

²⁵ *Axhi* another word for *axha* or *xhaxhai*, uncle, used as a respectful term for an older man.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Do you want to rest a bit?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: No let's continue!

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What were the '90s like, after '93? You were active most of the time in Drenica, right?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: Yes! Most of the time and during the entire time I was active, you know, in the municipality of Drenas and in all the villages in the municipality of Drenas.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: How did the '90s continue, from '93 onwards?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: Well, they were difficult, because they started firing workers from their jobs, I mean, there were obstacles to educating students as well. Then because of the severe situation in which parents were in now, they had also had obstacles in sending their daughters to school. However, we were always side by side and close to the people, either with...and at the time we also gave scholarships from the Municipal Council for Financing. We gave ten scholarships for students. I mean, with the resources we gathered from the Municipal Council for Financing, apart from the wages for the educational workers that had to be ensured at the time, we also handed out scholarships. We handed out ten scholarships. At the time we helped girls from businesses, we gathered scholarships from private businesses for their education, so that they wouldn't have to abandon their schooling halfway through, not to remain uneducated.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Did they close all of the schools here?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: With schools...they were open. There were pressures to close them, for example, the high school several times, however, there was still no one who could stop the students. You know, the determination at the time was for Albanians to never follow the orders of Serbs, I mean, of the occupier, even though many sacrifices were needed to protect them [the students].

After the incident of '93, which was a severe case, the Council for the Protection of Rights at that time, from the year 1993, with all of the material it had, I mean, the abuses in Drenas, we created the Hague file at the trial of Slobodan Milošević. You know, we were the first municipality at the time to create a file. In '93 Agim Rrellaku, Shaban Shala, myself, Shqipe Ahmeti, worked to complete the file. And we submitted the original file in the Council in Pristina, we had a copy here in the Council in Drenas. I mean, since '93 we raised an indictment as the Council for the Protection of Rights from Drenas against Slobodan Milošević, at that time for the abuse in our municipality.

Connected to this incident, there was a lot of abuse of activists as well. For example, on May 28, immediately after the case that happened on the 23th, on May 28, Shaban Shala was arrested with his brother Emri Shala, where they were abused in the cruelest way in the police station, so that when they described it, they tied them with their legs up {gestures up with her hand} and they abused them with their heads down {gestures with her hand towards the ground}, abusing them physically.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Was the population of Drenica constantly exposed to violence?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: The population of Drenica was constantly [exposed] to the violence of the Serbian state at the time, however despite their constant abuse, nobody could stop the activists. Many people worked. At that time many people were engaged, I mean, a great sacrifice was made.

Apart from the Council for the Protection of Rights, I was also engaged in the institution of the Municipal Council for Financing at that time. It was an institution that was created at the time to directly fund Albanian financing. I want to mention here that I got engaged in 1993 in the Municipal Council for Financing at the time and I did, at the same time, I was also a coordinator of the Council for Drenas for gathering the paychecks of educational workers at the time. With the Council, for gathering wages only for the region of Drenas, because the Council was organized into seven sub-Councils. I mean, for example, the Council of Drenas included Çikatova e Re, Drenas Njishi was included, Dyshi was included, Pokleku i Ri was included, Vaseleva and Pokleku i Vjetër.

All these villages included the Pokleku school, the school where Rasim Kçiçina is today and is called the school of Pokleku, I mean, the Fazli Graiçevci school, the school of Gllobari, because Gllobari was also included. And I had an obligation and responsibility towards these three schools, you know, to gather the educational wages as a coordinator, as a director of this sub-branch for gathering wages. Here we had to organize with the activists we had in the field, for example, in the village of Çikatova e Re, many activists at the time helped me in gathering wages time after time. For example, there was Qazim Shala, Hasan Elshani who helped me in gathering wages, there was this Qerkin Berisha, there was Nezir Gashi. However, in most cases, helping me with gathering wages in Old Çikatova, were Afrim Gllareva and Halim Bajraktari, who today is a martyr of the nation.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: How were the collections made?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: The collection of this money, for example, I went to Çikatova e Re, I called the activist who was engaged as a partner of the Council and we went house to house, meaning to *oda*. Then, at that time, the decision was that each family, the Municipal Council for Financing released a decision that families that had someone abroad had to pay around 180 Euros per year, 180 Marks, because the resources were in Marks at that time; and families that didn't have anyone employed paid two Euros per month, 24 Euros a year. For the whole year it was 24 Marks per year. And we had to collect them from each family, in some places where one had to explain this financing. To convince people one had to go through the *oda* until the head of the family was convinced, be it the woman, or the man. However little they had, they were asked then for their wallets to give resources. Men were directly asked more.

And we gathered these wages, they were submitted to the Council. Then the sum was rounded up, one part we took from the three percent,²⁶ back then it was from the migrants, a direct contribution of the migrants. I mean, 150 thousand Marks, 150 thousand German Marks would completely go towards 950 educational workers at the time, to give them wages. But there was daily activity that had to be done in each family. I mean, it was known that activists felt responsibility, that they took things to heart. And in cases when they were at risk of not paying wages, for example, we, all the activists of the Council, took on daily activities as a campaign, when the head of

²⁶ The three percent fund was a creation of the Kosovo government in exile during the 1990s. All Albanians in the Diaspora and Kosovo were duty-bound to pay three per cent of their salary into this fund to finance Kosovo's parallel institutions.

the Council was Jakup Krasniqi at that time. Later on, they also gave me the responsibility of the cashbox. I mean, on June 8, 1995, I was also the treasurer at the municipal level who held all of the payments of the educational workers. But apart from wages and the cashbox that I was responsible for in the office, I never left the field. Because I had responsibilities towards the field where I had been appointed as coordinator.

For example, one had to wake up early in the morning. You had the plan that was made for gathering wages, for going to Poklek and Vaselievë, because a village took, there were bigger villages that took two days until you finished all the families, but there were villages that only took one day. For example, Poklek had 120 families and when you entered Poklek you had to arrive at seven in the morning. I left the house, I ate a meal, I woke up early and got ready. I ate breakfast, because you can't ask for food from a family in the morning. You could eat an *obrok*,²⁷ lunch for example, when you found it served, or there were cases when a family invited us and said to us, "Since today you're in the field in our village, for lunch you're with us. Finish your activities, you'll have lunch with us and then you continue working." Because we couldn't go home to eat because it was far and the work would be left half done.

And for the work not to be left half done, not to have the activity left half done, we ate food among families. At seven I left my house, I went alone from Drenas, I mean, to Çikatova e Re, where I had a house in Poplek in the fields. But back then there was security, because people were very self-aware. Believe me, I'm very grateful to those people because their families received me well. I never had problems. In my bag it happened that I had 3500 Marks that we had gathered from a day in a village. I went alone. There were cases when people expressed a desire to accompany me home in their cars, but most of the time we walked on foot at the time. Because not all of the families even had cars. Only those with someone abroad or who had a business had it, not like today for example. And one had to thoroughly go through the village, house to house, to gather the funds. It was a difficult case, because it felt personally difficult.

For example, I met a family that always had [material goods], and it was difficult for me to go out and beg. A certain Hasan Barleti said to me in Çikatova e Re, an old man, he said to me, "Whose [girl] are you?" I said, "I'm Rama's." He said, "I mean, tell me who your grandfather is!" I said, "I'm the granddaughter of Hydë Rama." And everyone knew my grandfather as generous and he had a big *oda*, he was very good with money. In a matter of one, two seconds, when he held his head, "*Kuku*,²⁸ Hydë Rama, what a man he was (laughs), and his granddaughter goes out and besg for money" (laughs). And here I just stopped. I didn't get hurt from people because (laughs) people didn't understand things at that time. When he finished, I said, "*Axhë*, I want to tell you..." and I gave him a bad example.

I took a few girls whom I noticed during activities when I gathered funds in Çikatova e Re, and now I said, "Is it better to do what they are doing?" I said, I explained the entire case. I said, "Like myself, because I haven't gone out to beg for myself. 950 workers' families are supported from me, from my work...educators, 950 workers' families, how many members? I mean, almost half of the population is supported by my sweat." I said, "So, I'm

²⁷ Serbian: *obrok*, ration.

²⁸ Colloquial, expresses disbelief, distress, or wonder, depending on the context.

proud because this is a contribution for the people and for education.” I said, “Because these teachers, they too know the road of emigration, they know how to go abroad. But,” I said, “in order not to close the schools, not to have the students and youth become illiterate and uneducated, we’re doing this work for that purpose.” I said, “And this is the aim for us, not to have education lag behind, not to have our schools close down, and not to say thank you to Serbia and extend our hands to her, but we,” I said, “with our organization, with our volunteer work, will show that we love our state and that we want to build a state”.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: How many years did you do this work?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: Ten straight years.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: From which year until...?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: From the ‘90s up until the moment I was imprisoned, I was in prison until June 8, ‘98. I did neverending work and I never stopped with activities. I loved activism. I had a pride in my heart and when I did good to people, for example, I help whomever I could among the people, with a scholarship or with aid, I liberated them. Because we at that time... for example, clothes, we engaged families to clean the children’s clothes who had grown up, who had new clothes left, to iron them, to give them to us so we could send them to poor families. It was humanity at the grassroots level. People supported us in every organizing activity we undertook. And here, what I was saying with regards to finances, even the old man was obliged to call me into the *oda* and say, “Come, you’re welcome, just come inside the *oda* to drink coffee.”

Then I went inside, we had a long discussion and he apologized for the words he said to me. Because he experienced a woman going into houses as tragic (laughs). “instead of,” he said, “getting engaged, getting married somewhere, having children,” he said, “you’re going through houses asking for (laughs) money.” When I explained the cause, he was convinced and I convinced him, and he managed to apologize to me. However, overall I had a great time, because people received me very well, always. Even the head of the Council for the Protection of Rights asked me once, Agim Grellaku, all the colleagues were there, all the activists, the majority of them, and he looks at me like this (shows the way he looked at her). I was the only girl. I mean, in the Municipal Council I was the only girl and I was the youngest of all. Everyone else was a man. And he said to me, “For God’s sake, tell me honestly, how are you doing among families?” I said, “For God’s sake, do you want me to tell you honestly? Now I’ll tell you.” I said, “Where I enter, I leave like a niece with uncles.” However, I said, “And I myself behave well with them.” There were cases when I went to a person and said, “If you have a debt you have to repay quickly, I’ll wait, I’ll go to other families, because I’ll come to a solution with other people, but you don’t feel hard pressed. You’ll give me the money next time. What’s important is for you to meet your obligations to your country. Now you don’t have [money], you’ll fulfill it later, it’s nothing.”

However, there were cases, there were people who had to be given a receipt maybe for two Marks, just because they said, “Let my name also be written in the computer, to have the name in the computer that I’m also contributing to my country” (laughs). And one had to issue a receipt for two Marks. So, there were villages that were economically poor, they paid less. However, Drenas in general paid well. Pokleku i Vjetër, close to Pokleku i Ri now, were the most organized. However, the activists here as well, for example I can mention, at that time

there was in the beginning a teacher, a certain Hysnie Blakaj, who is now in Germany, and had her in-laws [living with her] as a newly bride now, as a wife, and they wouldn't bother her. She helped me, then there was Dalip Haxhiu, Nexhmedin Haxhiu in Poklek helped me. There were many people when I went to the village to gather money, I mean, funds, the wages for the educational workers, there were two people, three people, four people.

It was the school principal who later became engaged and later never left me, the director of the school Rexhep Cërrvadiku, who every time I went to Poklek he never...the director himself never left me, he came to the families with me. However, Poklek at the time was leading with money, because they gave the most. So much that, when I went to the Council to submit [the funds], [Poklek] was the first, leading in regard to wages, because schools received their wages as soon as the villages collected funds. There were cases... professor Jakup at the time asked me, "Zahri, can we leave Poklek? I'm sorry, because they gave funds and all, but we have other schools lagging behind and we want to give to others as well, because we have a lot of debt in wages." About the resources in the Municipal Council for Financing, as a woman I was the most successful of all the members of the Council. However, I had two reasons, because I could contact men and women (laughs). That was what made my job easier at the time.

And I entered without a problem in the *oda* of the men, but I went to the kitchen with women also without problems. There were families in which women helped as well and they supported me urging their husbands to pay and, "Don't let Zahrije go because this can't be done, how come this girl who is so young is giving her contribution, and you must pay your obligation." There were women, where the woman herself convinces the man to give funds. However, all the people who were informed, I mean, when you explained it well, most people were in support of any organization we carried on at that time. It's known that there were those at the time who did not have [means] and we understood.

But there were examples at the time, now for example, [one] said, "I would pay, [but] I don't have money," he said, "because I have turkeys, I have chickens, I'd pay 24 Euros." I won't forget one instance, a person said to me, "Zahrije, if you have money I'll sell you my turkey, my turkey is 24 Euros and I'll pay your fees." And that's what I did. I brought the turkey home (laughs). I said, "Here's the receipt, I'll tell my father that I bought it and my father will give me money." I said, "I'll give you the receipt and my father will give me the money at home," I said, "and, I'll take the turkey home." And the accountant at the time was Dibran Bajrakti, he's no longer living. He was a very good person. He was also a very good activist and supported me a lot. Because Jakup was the director, Dibran kept the accounts, Ahmet Morina was the treasurer earlier and from there I took on the cashbox as the treasurer. Now, the moment when on the same day I was elected treasurer, you know, professor Jakup, because I call him professor Jakup, resigned as the head of the Council. He said, "I can help you whenever you're in the field, gathering [funds], whenever you undertake actions," he said, "but now I have to be engaged in education." He took on the task of director of the Educational Council at the time and Izet Ibrahim was elected the head of the Municipal Council for Education. I mean, the same day I was elected treasurer, on June 8, '95, Izet Ibrahim was elected the head of the Council for Financing.

I helped everywhere, there wasn't an institution at the time that functioned where I didn't contribute. However, I really neglected my family, you know. Yes, I had support from my sisters and my parents and my brothers, I had

a lot of support, they supported me a lot. I want to mention an incident for example, the school in Çikatova, at that time it almost did not work in developing teaching. And the head of the activity at the time was Hasan Elshani and there were... I was the head of the sub-branch of Çikatova e Re and we undertook the organizing. One part... and we undertook, with the approval of the Municipal Council for Education, of professor Jakup, the collection of special funds and did not submit those funds to the Council. But they weren't funds committed to pay wages that the Council for Financing had at the time, they were voluntary funds outside those wages, the part that people had an obligation [to pay]. We collected from whoever could give cement, some gave gravel, some offered stones.

The school at the time didn't have a toilet. Meaning, at that time with the contribution of people, some offered funds, some gave gravel, some gave cement, meaning we did the organizing and we built six WC in the schoolyard, which the school uses today as well, we constructed them that well. We worked better at that time with volunteers than our rulers lay down roads today (laughs). However, the organization was successful. When we took on organizing they supported me a lot as well. All the male activists at the time said, "Let Zahrije lead us because Çikatova e Re has lots of income," I mean, it was like Dushanova, [they came] from all sides, around 53 villages came to Çikatova e Re, people [came]. Because nobody could hold Çikatova e Re, as the head of Çikatova e Re, one person, two, until the moment I took it on. When I took it on as the head, at the time, I held it until the end, when I was jailed. I held the leadership of Çikatova e Re because people didn't oppose me and I always [got] the votes, one vote was against me once, because all the votes were unanimously given to me, but of course because of my work. I worked a lot, and they saw my engagement, and they also supported me a lot.

It was our own contributions, and construction back then was done voluntarily, we never paid a handyman for building those six WC that we built at that time. [Among those] who worked at the time, today I thank Adem Heta, Nezir Gashi worked, Et'hem worked, whose name I don't remember. *Axha* Et'hem of Çikatova, of Baksi, the Baksi family, who came there. A certain Fazli Salihu also worked, to whom I'm very grateful and I feel indebted towards those people and when I go to the municipality I try to help them because of the contribution they gave as volunteers at the time. But also for the aid they distributed for *Nëna Tereze* at the time, for people, for every family I identified and registered, the head of Çikatova e Re at the time was Dastan Heta. We had a very good cooperation amongst ourselves, but they also respected me as the leader. It happened, for example, Dastan was the head of the association, he told me, "Zahrije, do the registration, that list that you gave to me verifies that you're able to go inside the family, to check whether their children are well or not. I'm ready to execute it." And he executed it.

And I want to mention a case for example, when I went to Drenas Two, to Drenas Two, as an activist for gathering funds. At the time we had Bajram Bajraktari. In Glllobar I'm sorry I don't remember that young man, he is a professor, I don't remember his name because I would like to mention it, but when I write the book, I won't forget to write it down, to point out his name (smiles). And I remember that incident, I went to look for the activist at home. The time was, it was a Sunday and Bajram wasn't at his home, his mother said, "Well, he went somewhere to see..." or to a wedding... I don't remember well. And in order not to waste the day, I went to his house to get, to begin gathering wages in Drenas Dy. Then I thought, where to go, where to go, I went to the house of the family of Ali Bajraktari. Ali Bajraktari was a good person, he was someone who also contributed in

earlier times. *Bac* Dibran was a relative of his, Ali was his paternal uncle, and where to go, where to go...because one had to choose [the right] people to go out into the field with at that time, because families wouldn't let you in with no matter who.

And when I entered the house a child told me... I, "Is it possible to...is your grandfather here?" He, "Yes." I said, "Call him for me, Zahrije Podrimqaku is calling him." And *bac* Ali appeared at the door, and I said to him, "*Bac* Ali, today I've come to focus on Drenas, to gather the wages. Bajram," I said, "doesn't happen to be here, he's our partner in the Council, he isn't [here]. Going home... I feel bad to have the day go to waste. As such, I have a request of you," I said, "if you would help me." "Please," he said, "whatever depends on me, I'll help you." He said, "Should I give you money?" I said, "No, not that, you've met your obligations. But you have many sons, if you could give me one of your sons to accompany me today to the houses, to families, so that I don't go alone, since Bajram isn't here." And what did he do? He called his sons and grandsons, he lined them all up. And keep that in mind, he smiled, thinking that I wanted to choose one of the young sons, do you understand, since I was a woman, a young girl {winks} (laughs). And I went here, and I chose, he said, "Which one did you choose?" I mean, I chose the oldest son, Murat, Murat Bajraktari. I said, "Well, I chose this one." And he started, he said, "But why this one, he's old, whom do you need?" I said, "For me, this one who has the authority to gather funds. Nobody knows these youths because it wouldn't be a problem. But if *bac* Murat accepts, I would choose *bac* Murat." And he laughed, and laughing he said, "No, Murat will go today." I said, "Maybe I made you lose a worker, maybe you had a work plan for your sons to work today at home, but I would take *bac* Murat."

And so that day in the field with *bac* Murat we gathered around 1500 Marks within a day, during that entire time. And he came and accompanied me and of course it was his village, and he was a local, he also knew the people, which families have [money], which families don't, because it was difficult to put families who didn't have [money] in a rough spot, to go in and ask for money. In order not to make them stand out one had to go in and say why we came, but, "We don't intend to impose on you because we know your situation."

So, the people, I wanted to say, even though they didn't have activists there, when we went to the villages, we didn't go back but we also chose a person who had authority in the villages. The families, like I said earlier, there were cases, in which you went with an activist who wanted to help and he knew the family and knew their biography, but they didn't give money. Maybe the reason they wouldn't give you money was the person you brought with you. I failed many times, because as I said earlier, Çikatova e Re always had newcomers, people who had moved there and nobody knew each other well, because it was a place inhabited by all the villagers who had come there. And when I took on the cashbox, I had to do it for him. The moment I became engaged in [keeping] the cashbox, I became now the person responsible for gathering funds at that time in 2003...it was 2005²⁹ when I took on the cashbox, one had to find a family member whom people love and who doesn't cause problems with people when you enter their yard.

And thinking, and thinking, there was the family of Shaban Bajraktari in Çikatova e Re that supported me in every action and [the family] of Islam Bajraktari. I mean, because for the families, even to eat one had to choose

²⁹ The speaker is referring to 1993 and 1995.

when you entered the *oda*, for example, when meal time arrived. And to support you and encourage the others, one had to choose the families. And after I took on the cashbox, I had to find another person to engage as a partner of the Council in my place. Afrim at the time, Afrim Gralleva, was engaged directly in the Council for Financing, for gathering, you know, gathering funds among businesses along with Aziz Morina. In their area of responsibility, they had all the businesses that were in the municipality of Drenas, these two had to gather [funds] among the villages.

And every member of the Council had an area, Ferat Shala had the area of Llapushnik over there, Selim Shabani had the sub-council of Obria on that side, and Fehmi Haradini had Fushetica in this area here. Izet, even though he was the head of the Municipal Council for Financing, as he was named the leader, had the Komoran area. I mean, all of us had separate areas, we divided villages for gathering funds. And now I thought, I said, "I want to go, Ramadan Bajraktari has many sons and they're a well-known family, because they didn't appoint a non-desirable person for gathering funds." Nobody opposed them on this, and I went to the *oda* of Ramadan Bajraktari and said, "I took...maybe you heard, the Council has engaged me, they gave me responsibility over the cashbox of the Municipal Council for Financing as treasurer. Now I keep the field, but only on Saturday and Sunday because every day the way I kept it, I can't keep the field any more for Çikatova e Re as well," I said, "when I come and when I leave, in Çikatova e Re too, I'll still help. I came to ask you, give me a son of yours, whichever one of your sons who you know isn't lazy and is well-behaved, give him to me to contribute," I said, "Bac Rama, because you have plenty of sons."

He started laughing, "You came precisely to me?" I said, "Look *bac* Rama, I could also go to other families, but I said that at this time, not everyone accepts you in families. Every activist...activists who belong to great families, to good families, have their own value because no one can oppose them." For example, to say, "You have this flaw in your family, or this. And you don't need to come to my family or give me advice or [tell me] about organizing to contribute or for you to tell me something about contributing to the state of Kosovo, to the Republic of Kosovo." And after I addressed him, I said, "One of your sons, whomever one you want." And he looked at all his sons and started laughing and said, "This imam." He had a son who is now a martyr of the nation, Halim Bajraktari. He finished school to become an imam, and he gave me Halim.

Halim was a very good boy, he was a very determined boy, and when we went in...we started, he and I, the first time we started gathering funds in the village, he hesitated. "Come on," he said, "you go home, I'll go to the door to go in and ask for funds." He was six years younger than I, I took his hand, "Come on Halim, because you're my brother. We're brother and sister, and if they kick you out, they'll kick me out too. And don't be afraid, wherever I go, in a house, in a house, through the chimney, through the chimney, in the kitchen, in the kitchen, you'll come" (laughs). And so, people never opposed us. They loved him a lot and he was very determined. Now, later on he put on a uniform as a [KLA] soldier, and he now is a martyr, he was killed in the village of Llapushnik in Granella.

I mean, with [the fact] that one had to choose people, because you had problems if you went among families with no matter who. I had an incident, I was lucky, for example the people of Drenica knew my father's grandfather Hydë Rama's very well. They knew him because of the great *oda* he had, he was generous and, as my grandfather said, we supported many families at the time, around four-five villages, with bread, because

they had a lot of land, and all the land was watered from a water source. They had around 25 hectares of land and 10 hectares of mountains. And when I entered a house, I explained whose I was, and whose granddaughter I am... "Ah, the granddaughter of Hydë Rama, come in." Everywhere they placed me at the head in the *oda*, wherever I entered they respected me a lot. However, what I'm saying is the family plays a big role, because I mean, with the work of my great-grandfather and forefathers, whom they know, and my grandfather, who were worthy people... My grandfather was defiant in *oda*. He wasn't educated, but he was very much a politician (laughs). But in the *oda* he challenged them so much that they said, "When Tahir Hydi spoke, around one week later, that's when the village understood what he wanted to say."

Eh, the activists of good families, they played their role and they had, I mean, they achieved more success. The work of the Municipal Council for Financing of education at the time, of educational workers, was obstructed a lot by the Serbian police, by the Serbian power of that time, which was determined to make the Council disappear and not function. However, our organizing, our determination made it so that we continued our work, to make Albanian language education function, at that time with the program of the Republic of Kosovo, even though Serbia stopped paying educational workers and left them without wages. Only one the part of the administration, I mean, the cleaners, resigned, they were paid with wages in the beginning. And in the beginning they showed such solidarity, that when all the workers in the administration were paid, when they got their wages, they split those wages in half with the educational workers in the beginning. When the Council was established, when the Council for Financing was created, the organizing was done, there wasn't any more...meaning there wasn't the need to split their wages, they split their wages with the teachers only for a time. July 2, I mean, July 2, 1997, was the holiday of...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: In '96?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: In '96, on July 2, 1996 the office of the Municipal Council for Financing at that time in Drenas was raided, there I was arrested. My stamp was confiscated, all the material of the Council for Financing, meaning, all the finances. And they confiscated, it was...the wages gathered within a day, 3145 Marks at the time and 2525 Dinars, they took from me in the cashbox. They didn't manage...we had the office of the treasury in the school...we didn't have our offices where we stayed and organized meetings and gatherings, but our second floor was special, the former cabinet of Defense was [dedicated to] education, where the arms and police were at that time, that's where our office of the treasury was. And when one had to work at the treasury, to go do the work of the treasury, we did the balance of the funds and everything had to be done in the school.

And that day was July 2, and the director said to us, "Everyone do their activities and be at work tomorrow." And well, I told director Hyzeti, I said, "Director, tomorrow July 2 is a holiday, it's possible the police will attack us because of the holiday." He said, "Zahri, tomorrow everyone has to be at work no matter who you are in the organization. And you have to be at the treasury." Because in the school of Dobroshevcu we managed to gather half wages, because when funds were gathered we also gave half funds to the schools. So on that moment when *bac* Aziz submitted the funds he gathered from businesses, and one contributor, somewhere around...two contributors paid around 800-700 Euros that they owed. They managed to gather those funds, because there weren't any in the cashbox and we always balanced the funds in the evening and got them out of the cashbox

quickly and sent them through the schools. Half wages were given to one school, half and half, one part in Dinars, one part in Marks. And the treasurer now knew how to distribute all the Dinars equally, what were Marks, all the Marks in equal parts, so that within a day we managed. I wrote the receipt, I just waited for the treasurer of Dobroshevcu or someone else to come and get the wages, because it happened that people who did not have a treasurer came, an educational worker or an individual would come.

The wages, in order for us not to get caught, always had to be carried through the schools quickly and be distributed to workers. And that day, the guard down at the school, I was on the second floor, he couldn't make it, he didn't notice the police on time to tell me, so that I could remove the funds, hide them. They came, they found the money on me, straight to the office and they took out these 3145 Euros, 2525 Dinars. They took the material from the treasury, they took them out, meaning, the evidence, that they took out that much money. And they had raided the office here at my uncle's house, near my house, the house of *bac* Sheqa, where we had our offices. They had also raided there, they took the computer of the Council for the Protection of Rights, so all the activists were raided and their offices, and they took me to the station, they had also taken professor Jakup Krasniqi and they interrogated him and Izet Ibrahim and Imer Elshani. All the activists were interrogated there, and they took me and Jakup to the station.

They kept me for five hours, almost all day, they kept me at the station for almost five hours and abused me. Not physically, they didn't abuse me that day, but they did it psychologically, threatening me with, "You work...you, a female, how? You don't mind your own business...What do you work for?" All sorts of words, words that are not to be mentioned or said, they threatened in other forms and so they took the money that day. And after a time, the Council for the Protection of Rights with the foreigners sued the police. And they managed to allegedly create their own group, to question us because the Council for the Protection of Rights sued because the Council's computer was confiscated.

After a time they called all the activists in for an informative interview in the police station, and on that occasion they took me to the station four days straight. And from that moment, this is the moment during all of my activities, when I felt very bad. I mean, I didn't feel bad because I was afraid when they took me in for informative interviews, they took me to the station, but I felt bad in front of the people whose money was confiscated, because that was the people's sweat, it was the people's citizens. How could I have the face, now I couldn't convince myself at all, I said how do I have the face to go out and ask for educational workers' wages, when the police took them from me. I took it very hard. Because I said, people took that money from food for their family and gave it for the educational workers, and the Serbs took it from me. Meaning, it was the incident where I, as a young person at the time, took the confiscation of the money very hard because they were direct contributions from people. This was the only reason I felt bad and was very worried.

However, professor Jakup spoke to me a lot at that time, because he supported me a lot and he supported me so much because he saw my contribution, that I never stopped. There were occasions, weddings at my mother's brothers, when her brothers married, do you believe me that she didn't go to the weddings. My mother wanted to take me to weddings to her family, I said, "No mother, because it is Saturday, Sunday and I want to take advantage of it, on one Saturday or Sunday I gather wages for a school. You go the wedding freely, because I

don't want to go to the wedding, I want to go out and gather funds, the wages of educational workers because educational workers are waiting”.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Did they physically abuse you then?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: No, not physically, only informative interviews, I was taken roughly four times for this incident when they raided and found the money.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What happened in 1997?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: I want to mention an incident there, then after the Council sued for the incident in which they took the computer, and the Council for the Protection of Rights, they called all of the activists to go to the [police] station. They went upon an official call. Professor Jakup went to an informative interview at the station. The head of the Council, Izet Ibrahim, Ferat Shala went at the time, Selim Shabani, Gëzim Shishani, Ukë Krasniqi, all of these people were in the police station regarding the Council event. I mean, Ymer Elshani and I were questioned on this raid, Ymer Elshani said to me, this is the poet whom, with his whole family, Serbia...only one girl from the family survived, they burned them in the Poplek incident on April 17, '99. And he said to me, “Oy Zahrije?” I said, “Yes, *bac* Ymer.” Because I was the youngest, I mean I always called older people *bac*. Those who were my age, I called brother, and so to find support as the only woman with them at that time, and for their support of me I respected them a lot. But at the same time their respect towards me was also the same.

And he said to me, he said, “Are you listening to me? You and I are not going to the police station at all.” I said, “I hear you.” Not that I was afraid, but since he said it, *bac* Ymer was older, “I hear you.” And they were all there, and professor Jakup came, when he came after he had finished, he said, “It wasn't dangerous, no.” He was thinking that I was young and whether Zahrije was afraid. And when they left, we were in the office, when Xhafer Qorri came with another police officer. I forgot his name, because I knew the name of that Serb as well, but this Albanian was Xhafer Qorri.

And I was in the office, Idriz Hajdari, *bac* Ymer was also there and then they came, “Do you have official invitations?” “Yes.” “What are you waiting for?” *Bac* Ymer said, “If you need us badly, come get us.” He said, “We don't have a reason to go there.” He said, “Get up, come on, get in the car and straight to the police station.” On that moment Idriz Hajdari followed him, I said, “Idriz Hajdari doesn't have an invitation.” Idriz was a young man and I felt bad for him, he was young and what if they physically abused him, he was also a bit temperamental, a temperamental type. He said, “Why are you the boss?” He addressed me (laughs). He said, “Are you the boss, or I am?” He said, “I say, come on!” I said to him, “Don't come because you don't have an invitation. Only *bac* Ymer and I have invitations.”

And when we went there to the station, we got out of the car, going into the police station, Idriz Hajdari said to me because he always called me aunt, you know. He didn't call me by my name but called me aunt, because that grandson of the Elshanis of Baiza thinking that I was also from Krajkova, of the Elshani clan. And now, he called me aunt. “Aunt,” he said, “please, after you.” And I said, “You're giving me an advantage here where they

beat you?” I said, “You’re giving me preference here? Give me preferential treatment somewhere else not here where they beat you” (laughs). And there we laughed.

I remember *bac Ymer*, I’ll never forget that incident, he went and combed his hair before he went and fixed his tie, he said, “A bit official Zahri? Maybe they’ll have a bit of mercy on us if we look a bit different. When they see we’re also older...” I said, “No, come on, no. Come on, because the others passed by fine, it will go fine for us as well” (laughs). This was the case of the Council for Financing, but in this way the Council for Financing was attacked and it was illegal for Marks to be found in the pockets of an ordinary person, let alone for an institution to deal with them. And the gathering of funds started until ‘98, I mean, and here when we did...in ‘98, when the checkpoint was placed in Drenas, there were such great abuses, that the incident of Likoshan of February 28 happened, in ‘98. And for the first time, this encouraged me, for example, all the sacrifices I made, my biggest desire was to join the Kosovo Liberation Army.

My engagement with the Kosovo Liberation Army was directly connected to the incident in which teacher Halil was killed, on November 26...November 27, the eleventh month of 1997 the incident happened, in Rezana e Re, there were there were direct attacks from the Serbian military. I mean, the machinery of the Serbian Army directly encountered the soldiers of the Kosovo Liberation Army. Now they lost everything they did there, because the winners were our soldiers and those who took over positions there. Wherever they went down the road, wherever they went down to schools, they shot with automatic weapons and teacher Halit, I mean, Halit Geci, was killed while walking into a classroom at that time with a notebook in his hand.

We as the Council at the time, we went with Ibrahim Makolli, Limka, Halime Morina who is now still alive. She was a very good activist and very hardworking and supported people in the field a lot, apart from the municipalities also the municipality of Drenas, she supported it a lot. They came from Pristina, they took us, they picked me up at the Council in Drenas and then we went to the village of Llausha. There we met [KLA] soldiers seated in an *oda*, and they told us about the entire incident. The wounded in this case, were none of our soldiers, apart from the killing of teacher Halit. We took the information, notes, we took photos there, and from this case the request came to me directly from the soldiers, that, “We need women to contribute, because they can move more easily, especially when we have to carry either a case for arms, or uniforms, from a city, to take them to the places where the soldier stay, whether in the family, in the *oda* or wherever the soldiers were sheltered”.

And here, I mean, on this moment, they and I decided that they should not call me by my name, “Find [a nickname], when we call you on the phone, or here, we will not mention your name not to endanger you.” And I said, “I don’t have a pseudonym, because my people, when I go out to gather the wages of educational workers and every action I undertake, they call me *malësorë*”³⁰ (laughs). And this name was given to me by the father of Shqipe Ahmeti, Arif Ahmeti, they almost all called me *malësorë*, I mean, on the basis of the work I did here.

³⁰ Literally mountain people but it can also be used to refer to people from *Malësia*, or *Malësi e Madhe* (literally Great Highlands), 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. In this case, it means mountain woman.

And here, always after they called me, or contacted me, they never called me Zahrije again, just *malësorë*. However, the Serbian police had found me. I remember an incident, when I left the bus station they sent them to take... That was a small mistake of theirs, because I said to them, "Have you read books, because it can't be done over the phone, because phones are tapped, one's voice can be recognized." However, they made some mistakes there and maybe that was why I fell into the hands of the police later on. The moment they said to me, "You Zahrije are going to go get a bag with uniforms, a woman from Gjilan will bring them," I have it written here, "a certain Dije Lohaj and you'll go out and take them. There are uniforms, bullet proof vests, some military equipment, there's a chance there might be also some small bombs in the bag. Will you go and get them?" I said, "Yes, yes I'll go."

And that day I went to the bus station, I went to get it as they told me at one o'clock. They didn't describe to me... they didn't give me the name of that girl. But they said, "She's a girl dressed in jeans, she has this kind of jumper, her face is thin, her hair is long up to here {touches shoulder}, and you'll take the bag from her." And I went to the station and based on the description, on how they had described that girl, I looked for her. And while looking for her, wandering there at the roundabout of the buses, I said I'll get a newspaper and hold it in my hand, to pretend like I'm reading something. The person working in the shop knew me, the person who worked in the shop was from Rezalla I think, as far as I remember from Likovc, I don't know. He said, "I know you girl," he said, "I know you very well. You're an activist, you're from Drenas." I said, "Yes. Where are you from?" He said, "I'm from Rezalla but it's not important for me to tell you, it's important that I know you and I'm telling you, do you see those people straight over there, turn your head and look over there." I said, "Yes." Two tall people, one in jeans, the other in sweatpants. He said, "They are inspectors and since you've arrived, they've been watching you."

And that incident was for example, when he said that to me, I said, "Very well, will you get out of the shop then? Come and let's walk around together because I came to finish a task and without finishing the task, either way, if they intend to arrest me, they'll arrest me here and... I won't go without finishing the task I came to do. But if you can, come out and accompany me as if I'm hanging out with you, or talking to you." And then this boy went and we walked around. They followed us while leaving, while walking. I saw the bag, I saw the bag, but not the girl. And I said, "You go now, because I found the bag." I was looking and approached the bag, because one could see the bag was a big bag, the kind of bag used to bring goods from abroad. My father, when he went abroad to trade, carried big bags, almost the same bags. And I said, "This must be the bag."

When while looking at the bag and observing it, that girl came, *trrak*,³¹ this Shehadija approached me. And she said, "Are you the girl who is looking for me?" I said, "Yes, that's me," when I saw her in jeans, thin, the way those boys described her to me. And she said, "Here's the bag." I said, "Come help me then, let's take the bag and put it on the bus." There she said, "I swear I can't, I can't lift it, people carried it for me onto the bus, I can't even carry it." I said, "Come on you, because I'll lift the bag, I'll lift you as well, just weigh it a little to one side." I said to her and she started laughing (laughs). We put the bag onto the bus where the luggage goes, we closed it, the bus was filled. He watched me, he noticed me, I'm sure the driver of the bus noticed the inspectors. And he went

³¹ Expression indicating speed of action.

and opened the trunk of the bus and took out my bag. I said, "Why are you taking it out?" He said, "I won't let this bag on because as soon as I leave, look at the entrance there at the exit," he said, "the police there always do a thorough check and you'll cause problems for me and the people and everyone, you'll cause me trouble." I said, "Leave the bag, it's nothing, I have a responsibility for that bag. It is nothing. An aunt from Germany sent me clothes, I have an aunt and she sent them to me. One typewriter, I don't have anything in it." "More," he said, "I won't let the bag on the bus and I won't let you on."

I saw that he was determined not to take me on the bus to Drenas to come here. And there I said to this girl, because she wanted to leave right away, I said, "No, you can't leave without knowing what happens to me." And we grabbed the bag, again she said to me, "But I can't carry it because it's far away." I said, "You're going to help me with this trunk straight where the bridge is today, the roundabout, when you go under the bridge to go to the road to Drenas." I said, "We'll go out straight there," I said, "and then you go home and there's no problem." I said, "I'll lift the bag, you just grab the bag, I'll lift the bag." I grab the bag, she takes one side. We went out to the road there. As soon as we got out on the road, I stopped on the sidewalk, she was waiting there, I said, "Now you go!" And I was looking at the cars to see if there was a person, someone I know from Drenas driving, or a person who is a family member.

When I looked, a 101 was coming...and I looked to see if it was the inspectors in their car. When I looked, an orange color 101, it had a green blanket in the back seats. And there I said, "This is a family person." *Trrak*, for the first time in my life I put my hand out to a car as a girl and I went out, *ttrrap*. I almost went out onto the asphalt when I put out my hand. He said, "Please, what's the matter, what problem do you have?" I said, "No, I don't have any problem, but if it's possible, since you have a free car," I said, "to take me. I'll pay you to take me to Drenas." "But where, Drenas is far." I said, "I'll pay you ten Marks," at that time it was a lot. And now, I had money to pay. I said, "I'll give you ten Marks, take me to Drenas." "Yes," he said, "I have, in Sllatina, my store is in Sllatina, until the store there." But before I said, "Will you take me?" I said, I asked him, "Where are you from, boy?" He said, "I'm from Sllatina." I said, "What last name do you have?" He said, "I'm a Zogiani." I said, "Are you any sort of men, you Zogianis?" I said to him, he said, "Well we are, but now I don't know, we'll see." You know (laughs). I said, "Very well, then you'll drive me, I'll pay you, and so on."

Then he said, "No, I go until Sllatina." I said, "Can you take me to Koretica? I have an aunt there with the Bekollis, at the house of Zeqir Bekolli. My aunt is with Zeqa's brother," and [I said] nothing else, "and I'll pay you, and I'll pay you to get there. It's close to you there." He said, "Very well, it's not a problem, get in." I said, "Very well get out them, help me put this bag in the trunk, because I can't live the bag by myself." He got out, helped me, and we put the bag in the trunk and left for Drenas. When we left for Drenas, before we came to the roundabout in Fushë Kosova, there's a road that goes this way {explains with hands} which today is...I think the faculty is around there. The house was somewhere in the middle, and that road took you to the Sitnica river, to the bridge. I mean, you pass all of Fushë Kosova and so on through Batusha.

He said, "But I don't know this road." I said, "I know it, it was good for us to go this way, not to go in," because I thought they'd tell them over the phone, with talky-walky as they were called then. They'll tell the police that that activist is coming and to wait for her. I said, "They're definitely waiting for me at the roundabout in Fushë

Kosova,” where the police were stationed. And we went through that village, we came out towards the river, to the bridge, to the Sitnica river and we went straight towards Drenas. And now, I was always watching the cars in the rearview mirror. And we arrived to Krikova, the place which is called Kroni i Mretit in Koretica, down there where the business center is over there. On the way I saw a brown Mercedes and our two inspectors in the mirror. Come on, I said, because I didn’t know how to tell him now, how to explain it to him.

While I was thinking, while thinking, I said, “Let’s go!” We got closer to the aunt’s at the Bekollis, the Bekolli *lagje*.³² “You boy,” I said, “I’m an activist”...as we were approaching, while talking, before I saw the inspectors, before he told me, he started, “Can I talk to you about something?” Like men, you know what they’re like, “I like you a lot, you are very, a girl very...well behaved, you’re a very good girl. I think I’ve seen you somewhere. Where are you from?” I said, “I’m from Drenas...” and so on, and so on, “my aunt sent me some clothes.” On the way, while we were arriving, then he said, “I’d like to discuss something with you and...” in that aspect he certainly was unmarried...I didn’t ask. And now I said to him, “Come on, this time I don’t have time, the next time we meet” (laughs), I said to him.

And now I was constantly looking at the mirror. When I saw the inspectors, then I said to him, “You boy, I’m an activist with the Municipal Council for Financing and I’m being watched by the police. There at the station the police followed me, I’m letting you know, but don’t be afraid! I’ll take all the responsibility for whatever happens. And for the bag, I’ll take responsibility. You should be determined to say you don’t know her, you don’t know where she’s from, but I drove her for money.” I said, “Here are the ten Marks.” He said, “No, I won’t take them! No, since the situation is like this, I’ll never take them.” And he didn’t take the money. I said, “And you turn here!” “The road,” when we got close to Koretica, I said, “the road is here! My aunt is here. Take me in front of the doors here! Come out and we’ll take out the bag together and you’ll continue your journey.”

I said, “They took your registration information, they’re going to follow you, to go to your house to ask all about me, but don’t cry. You stick to your words. Say, she paid me ten Marks and I don’t even know her or where she’s from.” And we went out and he started getting a bit afraid and he said, “*Kuku*, my sister how...how come you didn’t tell me, how could you do this to me.” But I said, “But you don’t worry, because either way I had to come with something. I take the responsibility. And if they try to arrest you, I’ll say, here I am, he has no guilt in this regard.” I said, “You don’t worry about this.” We went before the doors of the Bekollis, there to my aunt and they passed our car about five meters before our car and they stopped, I saw that they were writing. I said, “You know what? They’re more scared than we are.” But I said to him, “Get out!” to him, this son of the Zogianis. I said, “You come out, and help me with the bag. If they think,” because these relatives of ours are a big family, I thought not to cause them problems, “of arresting me, let them arrest me here.”

Wait, wait, wait, we opened up the trunk and they didn’t move at all from the car, but they stayed in the car. Then I said to him, “Grab the bag just behind...” the yard was divided by a wall, I said, “just behind the wall, and I’ll close the door, and you continue your journey.” I said, “And they well fly behind you. They won’t leave you

³² *Lagje* can mean just neighborhood, although more specifically, in the traditional tribal organization of northern rural Albanians, it refers to a group of families sharing a common ancestor.

without questioning you. But you don't worry, stick to your works, nothing bad will happen to you." And there I dragged the bag, the handle broke, because the bag was heavy. Nobody was in my aunt's courtyard and I took it to the chicken coop, I hid it there. And I went in to my aunt, and I said to my aunt, "Find me some other clothes, to change." I said, at least for them not to recognize me from my clothes to change into something. And from my aunt I took a jacket with a hood like this {shows the hood} and I changed my clothes and I said to her, "Find Burim for that [incomprehensible], have him bring a cart." We took the bag, we put it onto the cart and I said to the boy, "You go ahead with the cart, I'll go after you pass the asphalt and come out down there and go..." my other aunt was right in Balavi, because I said, "They'll come here, they'll surround the house and raid it." I said, "I'll change locations from there."

After I changed my clothes, I took my aunt's clothes and I covered the bag with a blanket, in the cart, I said to the boy, "Get up and stay there in case they open the bag to see what's in it, it's not allowed, it's forbidden to open the bag." "No, auntie," he said, "Selam [aleku], until you arrive at your aunt's [incomprehensible]. I'll stay in the yard." I went down to the fields, then I went another way and observed the terrain until I went to the other aunt's. When I went to the other aunt's I said, "Do you have a room with a key?" She said "Yes!" I said, "Find the key and come help me with this bag." We took the bag, I put it in the room, I locked it with the key. I wanted to secure the bag for them not to detect what was in the bag and not to be noticed for where I am and what I am and with what I am connected, what activities I'm doing, apart from the legal activities they counted: the Council for Financing, the Council for the Protection of Rights, and other institutions.

And here I wrote a letter, I sealed it with glue and I gave it to the daughter of my aunt. I said to her, "Go to Drenas and don't give it to uncle Rama, nor my father, nor aunt [incomprehensible] but give it directly to uncle Arsim, [mother's] oldest brother." Because the oldest brother, Arsim helped me everywhere, either with a car for transportation like a driver, or...he supported me. Because I would not come out to my parents about the issue of the army, because I thought if a word escaped them, they were endangered, they would endanger me and I would endanger other friends. And so, this girl brought it, she gave him the letter and tells my brother and says, "Like this, like this the inspectors followed her. I changed locations from the older aunt there to *dada* Shehide, from there I went to Balavi to the other aunt and I'm here tonight. If someone comes, if someone asks you, know that I'm here. Come get me here."

Now, she, my aunt, knew that I was sleeping here and got up from [incomprehensible]. And I, in my thoughts, said, "Aunt! Does someone have a phone here?" She said, "Yes, a neighbor has one. They're outside here." Then, only the families... usually, in villages there were no phones, the only ones that did, had sons abroad [and had it] to talk to them. Because a lot of people didn't have [phones] like today. And now, "Come on..." I said, "put on your coat and take me straight to that family, because I don't know [them]." I went with my aunt, I closed the bag in the room and I had their phone number in Llausha. I just called them on the phone, and I said, "I'm the person you sent on the trip, I've arrived! I'm here tonight. I arrived well." And I hung up the phone. No name or nothing. And they understood. And now they thought I was here, in my home, you know? And they went to my brother armed. They said we arrived, this, and this Zahrije brought uniforms for the soldiers. He said, "No, Zahrije sent me a letter. She isn't here. But I'll go with you and we'll go." And they came to Korotica to the Balavi's. But in the evening, darkness...it had already gotten dark.

And I [incomprehensible] I got away from there, after they came to get me and take the bag...my aunt's husband wasn't there, just my aunt with her children. "Go back," [I said] to my aunt, "go back and go back." She didn't go back, it was pointless. She noticed something. She was simply curious, "Here I'll help you." I said, "You go back, here we'll say goodbye to you, because Arsim will help me." I put the bag in the trunk with my brother. They had automatic weapons in the car, I mean, they were armed with uniforms, the soldiers and my brother with them. We put the bag there, when she went to go and open the door...when she opened the door she saw the soldiers (laughs) and went like this {lifts eyebrows}, she retreated. "Oh, sister," she said, "how come here?" I said, "Sister, I don't want to hear a word. Your husband, be careful not to make a mistake in telling him, nor anywhere, don't talk anywhere." I said, "As far as I'm concerned you can talk, but they'll take away your brothers, because me (laughs), because they can't catch me. They'll cause problems for your brothers (laughs), they'll cause trouble for your brothers." [incomprehensible] My father and other brothers...I was talking about my uncles. I said, "You trrak, shut up, and don't make the mistake of saying anything to anyone."

And we continued our journey there, through Vasiljeva, a shortcut, we went through all the mountains there without coming down on asphalt at all, here straight to Poklek. When we came to my home, my brother came out and said, "Are you coming Zahri?" I said, "No, *more!*³³ All this hardship and all this suffering, with the inspectors following me all the way to Koretica...I'm curious to see, was was my effort for? I want to go there" (laughs). And we went, there was...we went...this teacher, I don't remember his name...to his home. Yes! Skender Rreci. In the family of Skender Rreci, I ate dinner there, his wife served us dinner, all the soldiers were there. And they took them, they put on the uniforms, they had binoculars, bulletproof vests and four bomb. But only for soldiers...for around ten, 15 soldiers, there were uniforms in that bag. But this was an incident that I'll never forget.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Then they arrested you?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: They had photographed me there at the bus station, they had photographed me there together with Shehadije...with the bag, while we put the bag on our back, the photo because...the moment they arrested me, they showed me that photo.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: When did they arrest you and where did they arrest you?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: And now, this happened after a year. The arrest happened after a year. I'm telling you, because now I also did other services. I was in the village of Demjan. I remember the name of that person, a certain Halit, who was a former political prisoner, where the soldiers took me there to a certain Ibrahim, I took a bag filled with arms...with these...dynamite sticks. It was gunpowder. All five sets of fuses, they were tied. I took a bag there to Ibrahim and this Halit accompanied me and from there I went to...all the mountains of around Pashtrik, five villages, in the mountains of Pashtrik, all mountains up there almost to the border where this Ibrahim had his house...where I got that gunpowder. There was a lot of snow, in the winter, oh great God! It was December, December of '97...or was it the beginning of January, I don't remember well. But wherever you

³³ *More*, like *Bre*, is colloquial: used to emphasize the sentence, it expresses strong emotion. *More* adds emphasis, like *bre*, similar to the English *bro*, brother.

walked...broom, broom, broom...but I had sturdy boots (laughs), because I got them in Pristina, I got them precisely for the military.

What happened was, I was in a protest with Agim Vrellaku, we went into a store and I had money, because my father worked a lot, he was a great worker and traded in the market. After they fired him from his job he worked in the market. But he never let us suffer for money. He always gave me [money]. "Here's the money, take as much as you want, leave as much as you want. You're just a woman and your father is giving you the opportunity to never submit to any male." He always told me to be myself, he never left me without money. "No," he said, "because if you end up without money, you can deviate and suffer the consequences, so you should have more money than those who work with you."

And there in the protest, I had money with myself. When we went into the store, Agim was looking at me, Agim Vrellaku was the head of the Council, I was with him and I said to the salesman, "Find me a pair of boots that can withstand mud, snow and rain." He said, "But they're expensive, oh girl!" I said, "But how much could they be?" He said, "100 Marks." I said, "Here's 100 Marks." And I took those boots, I took them just for the army. I still have them there at my mother's, I keep them as memory. I told them (laughs as she talks), "Don't lose them!" I didn't manage to wear them out (laughs), they arrested me then. And so, when I went to the mountains of Pashtrik, there was snow, you would think you would not break through it, up to here {shows with hands}. *Brram, brrap, brrap*, all five, six villages and I didn't get tired.

On one occasion this Halit said to me, he said, "Very well, you! How can you do this journey on foot with me as a girl. How do you trust me? How did you manage to trust me?" It was to contribute to the fatherland as a girl, my contribution should be valued two-three times more than that of a man, because women have different challenges, what a woman experiences, and there are different obstacles that people pose to you, but I was determined and never stopped from my activities. When he asked me this question, for a moment I was hurt. Because I said, "What is this person thinking?" You know? I was young and he knew that I was an activist. I trusted him because he was a former political prisoner, for example, in '81, he was imprisoned for the events of '81. And when he said, "How can you, five, six villages all this way through the mountains, going up the mountains?" We went through the mountains of Pashtrik. He said, "You're doing [the journey] with me, and how can you trust me?" I said, "Very well you friend, you are a father of children, you're married, I could be your daughter. This is where my trust is. And plus people in this world came with *din e iman*,³⁴ as old people say here." I said, "And man, first of all I trust myself, I have faith in myself. And when I have faith in myself, no one can do anything to me." And during this journey, he then turned and apologized for the words that he said, "I apologize. I apologize, I just wanted to see how you would react, and you reacted very harshly, and so on. Don't be hurt and don't be offended, because I respect you as a sister..." I said, "It's all fine, between you and me. The journey I've started is a contribution to the national cause and I respect you as a brother." I said, "I am also an activist, I have ten years of activities and among men I've always felt like a sister with many brothers." And he was surprised by my words and apologized several times.

³⁴ Turkish: *din e iman*, religion and faith.

When we went to the *oda*, to Ibrahim, we took this bag there and we talked. And he was talking about someone, “He had a house, very small...” usually these families near the border were [incomprehensible], they were also victims...I mean, they also cooperated with the enemy. He was telling, he said, “And so on, and so on,” he was telling them, “this house belongs to someone who carries mail to Albania and Kosovo over there and works with the Serbs.” I said, “I will carry out this *amanet*³⁵ for you.” And he gave us that bag with gunpowder fuses and that night I slept over at the family of this Halit. It was a big family, I mean, the mother with this dress with wooden boards that women had in those areas,³⁶ and they received me well and everything. Now in those areas they don’t make tea, but they had the kettles on the gas stove for a guest from Drenica. And they got up (laughs) to make Russian tea for me (laughs) even though I wasn’t a big drinker of tea, you know? Because we always had fruit in Krekova and we used fruit more.

And now I spent the night there and that older woman with working clothes, to me, determined, gave it to me. “Take it, take it!” I said, “No, you keep it here because there’s no war here, because we in Drenica have war and I can’t take it because they are burning houses there. And there are raids there every day, arrests of people and one doesn’t know what will happen.” I said, “It’s better for you to keep the national dress. I enjoy these Albanian national costumes because they’re an old tradition of ours, but for a long time I’ve been unable to take them and to be burdened with them, because I’m doing other work (laughs). I don’t have time to wear these.” And that older woman now...was very *burrënore*³⁷ and received me so well.

The next day Halit accompanied me to Gjakova by bus. I didn’t know that there was a checkpoint in Klina. But I was prepared with clothing. I had a black coat down here {points to her knees}, a flat scarf this wide {shows size with hands}, over around two meters long, and when I wrapped myself in it, I became just like an old aunt. And more simply, one had to improvise. I...Halit accompanied me, he got me on the bus all wrapped in that scarf...and I was wearing *dimia*,³⁸ with the boots I bought for the army, but I also had the scarf I had prepared, for example to look like the old aunt of the house to improvise with clothes...to lose *trag*,³⁹ to make them lose my traces. And here, on this occasion, when I arrived in Klina, I saw a *punkt*⁴⁰ filled with Serb police. Mmm. I had a woman close by with children. I was sitting by the window, the bag, I just put clothes in the bag, the chair like this and I covered it with the jacket and the scarf and I wrapped myself in it. And there I took from my documents, I took out the Serbian identification card. We just had these identification cards, they were Yugoslav...and I prepared it and put it aside.

³⁵ *Amanet* is literally the last will, but in the Albanian oral tradition it has a sacred value.

³⁶ Has women traditional costume is made of a short white shirt and a white linen full-length dress. Long white briefs serve as underwear, the traditional *pshtjellak* (apron in front and back) in the back has a built-in wooden plank. The *jelek* (vest) is enriched with beads, mostly red

³⁷ *Burrënore*, when a woman has so-called more masculine features. Used to describe a woman who’s not conventional in the sense of stereotypical gender roles.

³⁸ Billowing white satin pantaloons that narrow at the ankles, Turkish style. They are made with about twelve meters of fabric.

³⁹ Serbian: *trag*, trace.

⁴⁰ German: *punkt*, checkpoint. A police checkpoint.

I said to that woman, “Bring the child closer this way my sister, because I have something dangerous in my bag. And lean on my shoulder somehow and also all the kids by me, and I want to look like I’m sleeping. “Nothing,” she said, “don’t worry.” I said, “Because this time, if it it’s *kismet* to survive, that’s good, if it isn’t I’m a goner here, I’m through” (laughs). And there I leaned against the window, all wrapped up like an old aunt and with that coat and I covered the bag as well, and that woman helped me a lot. She brought all her children close to me in that chair there, I pushed and gave her space to sit with her children as well on the side of my legs. And that woman protected me a lot, that woman whose name I don’t even know, or know where she is, or who she is, and here I was up against the wall thinking about God and at that point I said the Shahada⁴¹...even though I never prayed or anything but...praying to God and saying, “Oh God, I’m working for a just cause and for my people who are oppressed and for my own rights. And God willing, oh God, now God will save me.” And thinking this and saying the Shahada and praying non-stop to God...in my thoughts but not aloud, because I pretended I was sleeping, but I was thinking directly about prayers to God.

And the police entered, the bus stopped, they took identification cards from everyone and checked what the names of the people were. They didn’t ask for my identification card, because I pretended to be sleeping. He just extended his head like this, that woman told me...that woman just told me, because I couldn’t see because I pretended to be asleep with the scarf almost like this {shows how the scarf covered her face} eyes covered, leaning like this...but I was also tired, because I happened to stay up all night without sleeping where we slept over at that economically stable family, talking. And we passed the checkpoint there.

When we passed the checkpoint there, when we arrived in Llapushnik, I got off in Llapushnik. Because in Komoran I knew there was a checkpoint, and here in Llapushnik I got into a car to my village and from my village then my brother came, and I went to my house there and sent them. And from my house, then I sent them to Llausha, I gave them to the army there. But this was...God helped me every time I worked for the nation (laughs), because I went through many (laughs) different incidents and different dangers. But God always saved me. And...because one now forgets the events and there are many events that need to be told because...(breathes deeply) one now forgets even the events that one should tell and so on. But regarding this, this activity, this great contribution, but I’m telling you that women’s contribution, on the basis of what I’ve experienced, on the basis of the journey I’ve walked through, for me women who contribute to the Albanian people should be valued twice as much as men. Because apart from the contribution and the hardship and the sweat, women have also another challenge, different challenges that they experience differently from the other gender.

It’s worth mentioning another incident, for example the incident of Likoshan on February 28, ‘98, when the incident happened in Likoshan.⁴² And in Likoshan, with all the members of the Council for the Protection of

⁴¹ One of the five pillars of Islam, the Muslim declaration of belief in the oneness of God and in Muhammad as his prophet.

⁴² Between February 28 and March 1, 1998, Serbian security forces launched a series of attacks in the villages of Likoshan and Qirez, in the region of Drenica, in response to a KLA ambush of police officers. These attacks resulted in the killing of 24 non-combatants, as documented by Human Rights Watch among others in the report, *A Week of Terror in Drenica: Humanitarian Law Violations in Drenica*.

Rights and the team of doctors who were [there], Dr. Hafir Shala was in the team of doctors, today he is missing... Doctor Arsim Haxhiu, there was a nurse, an Eldira Ahmeti and my brother Arsim Podrimqaku. We went to Likoshan with a truck from the hospital, I think the driver was Xhavit Musliu, who drove the truck. We went to Likoshan and we went to help those families and when we went there, all the women were gathered in a room in an old house, the wall of that house was around 50 centimeters, I remember like it was today, it was thick. And first we visited the bodies, all those bodies, the doctors took notes, doctor Hafir and doctor Arsim. Doctor Afir usually took notes on where they were wounded, where they were all wounded and... doctor Arsim, with my brother, took off all the clothes of the bodies that were there, apart from the bodies of the Likoshan family that the police took with themselves. We photographed them and took down the information, notes, of everyone and there Doctor Arif and the parent of these four brothers addressed me... of these two twins who were of the Qerezi, whose sons were killed and himself.

Because the families of the Qerezi of Likoshan were together, in one [separate] place from the women. They all begged me to go to the women, because the women were going crazy. And I went directly to the women there. They had, I remember like today, two *sofra*⁴³ laid out and no one near those *sofra*. All far away, two *krelane me duqa*⁴⁴ as they used to bake with corn [white] flour, and peppers in cream on the *sofra*, and no one sitting and eating because of their grief, because of their cries. There I spoke to the women, I spoke to that old woman whom I did an interview with, I don't remember her name, because apart from the 24 victims who were there, there was also a woman, a Rukija, a pregnant 24 year old, almost at the time to give birth. I mean, and I don't know with what... I'll never know, but according to what they said, with dum-dum bullet her head was completely flat. The head was all deformed, completely flat in this way, and it was deformed.

And that night, apart from giving first aid, Doctor Arsim gave, doctor Arif, injections to the women and girls, whoever wanted to take them, there were some who didn't accept them. We also gave them drugs. We stayed until late in Likoshan, I mean, it was terrible there. All young men, each one more beautiful than the other. The Likoshan [Ahmeti] family, all of them, one by one, they had massacred them, behind their house over there. And... as one witness said, two young men, close by, on the roof of a house there, who survived, close to the chimney, they had seen that terror with their eyes. Those boys are alive today. And I took down their names in the statement, everything we observed, we created a file with photos, with everything, with the entire incident.

All of Kosovo became known from that incident in Likoshan and the burial itself, for example, thousands of citizens were at the burial. It was a severe case, as I said. And there the activists were, each of them, some with teams of doctors, some went to Likoshan in other forms, and Shqipe with Ilfete Spahiu. Because in the Council for the Protection of Rights there were many women, there was Elmije Blakaj, I mean, a partner in the field there, Shqipe was responsible for the area of Drenas, for the Council for the Protection of Rights and Ilfete joined later on, I mean, in 1995, she joined the Council for the Protection of Rights for the first time, she was a student, at the time, in the Law Faculty. She was also in Likoshan when we went, we met, she was there with

⁴³ Low round table for people to gather at communal dinners, sitting on the floor.

⁴⁴ The bread is cooked in the oven in a specific way - which then is taken apart (with hands or fork) at it remains in that lumpy consistency. "Duqa" specifically can be translated into "Lumpy"

Shaban Shala, they were in Likoshan, Ilfete. And I was with the team of doctors. Later then, Shqipe was with Ilfete, they even happened to sleep over at the Likoshan family.

But it was a very severe case, it was a great terror. And so all the people there, their sisters, they had one in Switzerland, for their brothers, because ten men [were killed], all young, each more beautiful than the other. She said, she said publicly, the day she came from Switzerland and when they were buried, "Had they been at the front, not all ten of them would have died." You know, her brothers. So it was a very heavy case, the incident of Likoshan, but the incident of Likoshan happened and the people, everyone, all the people rose up in support of the Kosovo Liberation Army. But however strong was the people's desire to fight, there weren't arms.

Before the incident of Likoshan happened, the [KLA] army sent me to Pristina to Agron Ramadani, meaning it was two weeks before the incident of Likoshan happened. I went to Pristina to Agron Ramadani, they sent me, "Go to Agron, he has some arms and he'll give them to you." And I took the taxi driver, I paid him and went to Agron and he gave me the weapons. He said, "Does that person know what you're here for?" I said, "No, the taxi driver doesn't know what's here." We put them in the car, I came to Drenas. When I was coming towards Drenas, here were the buses usually stop, when students come to get on the local bus to go to the faculty, this part here - I don't know what it's called, before you go under the Pristina bridge, here at the entrance, here, by the Technical School and there was a store there - it turned out the police were there.

And on that moment they were stopping cars, stopping them one by one, you know, , to search them. On that moment, before they got to our car, the car they searched before ours...they did, they searched it and they went back to buy cigarettes from the store, and there we passed and came to Drenas and we brought them, I mean, the weapons that Agron had, to send them to Llausha as agreed with the soldiers. And...then, during the night, in my family, since I sent them to my family, during the night when everyone was sleeping, with my brother, with this Arsim - we had a big car, my father got it for 17,000 Francs from Switzerland, it was brought to us, [by] a certain Rrahim from Damanek and it was a very good car, yes, underneath you could hide whatever you want, underneath the car - and my brother took them, he tied them up there. And at around one in the morning, since our parents were asleep, they didn't know anything, with my brother we sent them and we started that car and we sent them to Llausha.

While we were transporting them the police was already watching, I mean, when we went there as well, the [KLA] soldiers were surprised, how we were able to send them all the way there. Because in a way, as a woman, and who knows how they evaluated you, whether she can perform the tasks or not, whether she can be trusted with things and can carry such great responsibility. And so, after we left the weapons, they begged us, "Will you come to eat a meal, to stay?" We said, "No, nobody knows we came, if something were to happen." And we closed the doors, we left everyone asleep, not one, we didn't notify anyone. As we were coming back, they shot at our car from the bus station in Skenderaj, and my brother is a very good driver, because he's also an instructor at a driving school, and...he knows how we managed to escape the attack, when they attacked us with arms there and we survived. We finally made it home, we went in to go to sleep, the family knew nothing and heard nothing (laughs), because the running car wasn't really heard, but we also opened the doors slowly and we closed them slowly.

And...after the Likoshan incident, the massacre of Poklek i Ri happened on May 31.. And the massacre of Poklek i Ri on May 31, when it happened, I mean, it was a police officer with the name, he was called by the pseudonym Lutka. His pseudonym was Lutka, in the notes of the Council I knew his name from the statements that we close with names and last names, we observed everything. That data is still in the Council today. Who knows how fast he was moving when he collapsed, here in Poklek and he said, he called the forces, "Because the terrorists shot at me, Albanians and the KLA shot at me." And a great number of forces came, they went thoroughly through Poklek, this area, the neighborhood of Poklek i Ri. And I observed the entire incident from a distance of 500 meters, and I informed the Council right away about the incident that happened and I passed on the information to the Council and the Committee for Information, to Xhemail Mustafa. They took out all the families at once, everyone, women and children and men.

They separated men on one side, they put them into a room, in a house. And they lined up women and children on the road towards Vasiljeva, all of them. They shot at all the houses, the scene of the incident could be seen from where I was observing it, it could be seen...they were shooting, they had big cans, burning fuel, gas and benzene and they set them on fire. Before they burned them, first they raided them, [they took] televisions, they took furniture, they filled up trucks, first they raided them, [they took] whatever they found of value, of use to them, and they liked. Then they burned all the houses. And after they finished...yes, the men who were detained, the women and children for Vasiljeva, the men they detained, they were all executed that day. After the forces retreated, immediately after the forces retreated, I came to Poklek. And there, when I tried, I was an official of the Council, there were about 20 men there and I told them, there were other people, but I was an activist.

Xhema Binaku, you know, from Gllobar, who now is the director of the administration, was a journalist at the time. And I said to him, "Xhema, you have a duty as a journalist, not to get ready information from me, come to the scene of the incident, I want to go there." And I begged him and he didn't come, "No," he said, "I won't go, because they were killed, I don't want to go and be killed." On that occasion, Izet Binaku came to me, he said, "Here I'll come and I won't leave you alone." I said, "No, you won't come, you're a simple citizen and if you are killed," I said, "no one will say anything about you, because you're not charged with any kind of duty." I said, "Stay, you have six children, stay, it isn't your job to come. Those who have a duty to go," I said, "aren't going. I'll go alone." I went to Poklek by myself. When I passed the bridge, on the way to Krajkova, there, Qerkin Berisha came up to me. And Qerkin Berisha in that moment...after he came up to me, I said, "Why did you come too?" He said, "No, I swear, I will never leave you." When we passed the roundabout, which today is in the center of the city and connects the road, we went out onto the sidewalk.

Here the roads were full of small army tanks, police cars, all armored cars, everything, coming on the main road to the station. And we, walking like that, and there, Qerkin addressed me, he said, "Don't be offended Zahri, I want to tell you something. Sister, can I hold your arm as if we are," you know, "spouses," he said, "maybe they'll think that, in case something happens to us." And there I said, "Oh, freely," I said, "give me your hand and take my arm Qerkin, because I don't have such complexes, I don't suffer from such complexes." I said, "But I swear it's pointless, my brother, because they recognize me from an airplane. They know me like a red coin [They know me very well], because they're used to seeing me like this every day in the field and in activities." He

said, “Yes, but maybe they are outsiders, at least they’re not from Drenas and don’t know us.” I said, “It’s not a problem at all.” And there we came together, straight on the road, because there was no other possibility to hide from them.

And when we entered Poklek, here we noticed, I mean, how they had taken people, they left them one meter and a half from each other in the places, in those places where they executed them. There blood was spilled, one could see the traces of blood, I mean. And around a meter away from each other, and one could see when they were dragged and loaded onto the trailer. And now, of those ten people one was found, an Ardian Deliu, his body was found behind his house. He had a bullet here {touches her neck} and one straight to the forehead {touches her forehead} they shot him from a close distance with a revolver. Surely all the other bodies were loaded [onto the trailer]. One could see how the blood was spilled, because they were found on the gravel, at the house of one of Plluzhina here, higher up. Pants were found there, and a belt, and teeth, and hair and I mean, one of them resisted there and they massacred him.

But it was a grave case, the houses were burnt. The blood there was fresh, one could see that. And there, a dog was there, a very big dog and he did bark at Qerkin, straight to me and it looked directly into my eyes, to attack me. And if Qerkin wasn’t there, that dog, would have, would have killed me there. Because the dog was also certainly drugged, because that dog was terrified, from the banging, from the fire, there was so much fire coming out. And Qerkin took out a plank of wood and threatened the dog, and then the dog ran and went into its doghouse. We looked at all the houses, one by one, and took notes from people and everything just to get current information. Then the next day we came, we took photos. We didn’t have a camera at the Council, I took a camera, went to Rasim Musliu, I asked him, I said, “Come on, do you mind coming with me,” I said, “it’s your camera, you know how to use it,” I said, “and I’ll take notes and you’ll take photos.” I bought the film myself, the camera was his. I bought the film myself so I would have it, if needed. We used five rolls of film, which we used to document the entire incident. And with that film and the statements we took from people, we created the entire file.

Prison

[Cut from the video-interview: the interviewer asks the speaker about the period of the war, and how she experienced it.]

Zahrije Podrimqaku: On June 8 '98, Shaban Shala called me and said, he said, “Zahrije, you’re going to go to Pristina to get us the uniforms for the special units. They’re black uniforms with pockets, with vests, they have pockets up and down. And the pants are black with big pockets, Behgjet knows,” Behgjet Shala, he was on the Council, the Council secretary. He said, “Go out together, you choose them with Behgjet and bring us the uniforms for the special units.” I said, “But the money?” “The money,” he said, “the Council will pay for everything there.” He said, “And also bring us, we need cameras, a camera to have here.” And there I said to him, “I swear Shaba, as far as going, I’ll go, but I’m telling you, I will not return.” He said, “Are you afraid?” I said, “I’m not afraid Shaban, but send Elfete instead of me, I’m tired, I go out to the field and you just hang around there”

(laughs). I said, "And send Elfete." "No," he said, "Elfete was noticed." I said, "And where was Elfete noticed?" This is exactly what I said. I said, "She became engaged later on and Elfete was never out in the field to be noticed by the police. They know me, I've been interrogated five times." Then he said, "Come on, come on, don't joke around, go. Are you afraid?" I said, "No, no I'm not afraid," I said, "fine, I'll go." So I could tell them that they had followed me and they could...

And on one occasion I ran away from them, but the protests, I participated in the protests after the Likoshan incident, we held some protests sitting down, quiet or rather with bells, with...striking them. And after these ended, inspectors followed me, and I escaped from them, I almost slipped out of their hands. Four or five, or how many there were left the car, I went straight through the graves, I went through houses in neighborhoods, and I spun around like this, then I went to the office where I had a fax machine at the house of Shaban Neziri on the way to Krajкова. We had a fax machine that we paid for the office of the Council to send information there. When I went there, professor Jakup was there, and I was breathing heavily from having to run away, and he said to me, "Well, what happened Zahrije?" I said, "I swear professor, the inspectors are following me and so on, but they turned back when I went through houses, maybe they were afraid in case there was something, in case they were to encounter resistance somewhere," I said, "and they turned back." I said, "But because they followed me, I went straight through the graves," I said, "I went over the fence." And laughing, to rid me [of my fear], "No, you were scared, because there's nothing, it's nothing" (laughs). Ah I knew very well that I was under observation, because you could notice the surveillance.

And now, the case of going there, that day I went on foot from Krajкова, I went early. But in the evening, when they said to go tomorrow, I mean, to go on June 8 to get us the uniforms, I got up and went in the evening, I went to speak in person and I asked, I said, "Where is Shaban?" "In Likovc." And I got up and went to Krajкова, and from Krajкова I went to Likovc. I went on foot to Krajкова, and a car took me from Krajкова towards here, but I never knew who that person was and I went to Likovc. When I went to Likovc, I looked for Shaban Shala and I met with Elfete. She said, "Shaban isn't here." Since she said, "Shaban isn't here," then I also asked the other soldiers and I met Rasim Kecina who today is a martyr. There Rasim bought me a Schweppes, a juice, "I swear, you're tired, sit, rest a bit, breathe, now you'll go to Drenas." Then from there, meaning from Likovc, I got as far as Terdevc, I came with a car and from Terdevc and Bainca I went on foot to Krajкова.

When I went to Krajкова on foot, I got so tired and I got sweaty, I sat in front of the school in Krajкова. And I was staying there and I was resting because I was out of breath, I had to pass by most of the villages almost all on foot. And I met with Shaban to explain things, to tell him I couldn't go because I was in danger. And he left me with these words, "You're not going because you're afraid." I said, "No, as far as going goes I'll go, I'm not afraid at all. But I'm telling you that as far as returning goes, I won't be returning." While resting, Shaban Shala's brother came, Elmi Shala, with a car. I said, "Had I known, I would have sat and wait," I said, "there in Terdevc, and would not have walked the entire time," I said, "Because I was in Likovc." "Kuku," he said, "I'm sorry for you Zahrije. I see that you've gotten sunburnt and are sweaty." All the skin on my face had turned red from tiredness. I said, "No, now it's done..." "Now?" I said, "I'm going, I'm resting here with my uncles and I'll go down with someone because I'm going to go to Pristina."

In that moment, I took to the road straight to Drenas. From Drenas, I just told my family, but there my grandmother begged me, “Don’t go daughter, don’t go, and don’t go.” Yes, because Drenas was entirely empty, there were no families there, none. Only I, there in the office, who had to do reporting. And I tried to also go where they were to stay with the soldiers. But Shaban said to me, “We need you in Drenas, Zahrije, we need you in Drenas.” And here now, my grandmother followed me to...far away in the neighborhood, begging me, “No daughter, don’t go, daughter, don’t go please, please because I’ll never see you again,” she said, “I won’t see you again” (laughs). And she begged me, “Listen, and listen oh...” because I called my grandmother *nona* [grandmother] Hanë, because Mihane [was her name] and now, “Oh *nona* Hanë, I have no choice but to go because they told me to go, and I told them I would go and I will go.”

And there I left, I came to the office here. In the office I met Xhema, and he said to me, “What happened Zahrije?” I said, “I’m going to go to Pristina,” and so on, “I’m going to go.” I said, “But I went to meet with Shaban, to explain things, to tell him I’m in danger and I dare not. But I didn’t meet anyone,” I said, “and they asked me for the uniforms for the special forces, I have to send [the uniforms] to them.” I took the entire file to Poplek i Ri, five rolls of camera film, all with declarations with photos, with everything, and I sent it. I mean, I went as far as Gllanasella with Xhema. In Gllanasella I looked for Fehmi and Xheva⁴⁵ to meet both of them, but they weren’t in Gllanasella. There in Gllanasella, I met Gëzim, Gëzim Shishani. I said, “Gëzim, accompany me,” because the night had started in Dobroshevc. I said, “Take me to your women to sleep over tonight, so that in the morning I can go to Pristina.” I thought to go out to Grabovc to get on the bus and go to Pristina.

In those moments, Gëzim took me home, when he took me home, he said, “Here’s the house, here’s the key, lock it. There are plenty of rooms, you’re alone.” I said, “No, I’ll never stay here.” He said, “But we’re also here.” I said, “I can’t stay, because first of all I’m a girl, I’m unmarried, young, someone will say something or throw a word at me. Where is your wife?” “I swear,” he said, “my wife is in Grabovc.” Then I said, “Take me to Grabovc.” And that night, while going there at night, the soldiers said to us, “Don’t go because there are attacks in Obiliq,” and we went to Grabovc. I slept over with the family in Grabovc.

When I went to Grabovc, I slept over that night with Gëzim’s in-laws, Gëzim Shishani had his wife there settled with children. And that night I was tired from walking because of the long journey I had in Likovc, and from Likovc to Krajkova and to Drenas, and then Gllanasella, and from Gllanasella to Dobroshevc, and from Dobroshevc straight to Grabovc. And so, I fell asleep right away on the bed I was sitting on. And they just gave me a blanket, they covered me, and they left me like that. The lady of the house had prepared a chicken, the sister in law of Gëzim’s wife, the wife of Haki, Haki Mjekiqi. And now, she woke me up from my sleep, “Get up to eat.” I said, “Why did you wake me up? I wasn’t hungry because I took some bread that Xhema’s wife gave me. On the way I ate it with cheese, and I would have been more grateful if you had let me sleep, instead of waking me up to eat chicken.” But I was so sleepy, sleep wouldn’t let me go, I said to her, “You know what? That soup you were planning, serve me some to eat quickly and find me the place where I’ll sleep.” I ate that meat there,

⁴⁵ Fehmi Ladrovci (1950-1998) was a political prisoner and early KLA fighter who was killed during a shootout with Serbian forces together with his wife Xheva Krasniqi Ladrovci (1955-1998), a political activist in the *Illegalja* nationalist movement and KLA fighter.

they all got up [to eat], just the meat and nothing else. I got up, washed my hands and went straight to the room and slept.

Somehow I had a feeling, and as I was combing my hair in the mirror, I was thinking and said, “I swear, I’m not going back home again,” and I looked at myself in the mirror. And I told this to that woman, I said, “*Bre*,⁴⁶ somehow I’m very hesitant to go, because they will arrest me.” “No, come on,” she said, “go just this time, tell me [where the Council is].” Because, she wanted to come with me to Pristina, to learn [the location of] the Council so that, “When you need something next time, to get work done in the Council, my family is from Pristina and I will not be noticed, and I’ll go. Just show me the Council, other times I’ll send material and I’ll take it and bring it to you without a problem.” That woman, she was a very *burrënore*⁴⁷ and capable woman. She said, “Because I’ve also filled two bottles of milk to send to my brother since I’ve milked the cow,” she said, “we’re going today. Come on, we are going, we are going.”

We went to the bus, but while at the bus station there, I noticed that a car of inspectors came there, turned and we went straight to Pristina. And there was someone who...unwanted, I hadn’t...he saw me on the bus and knew me, and said to me, “Why didn’t you let me know that you had to go to the Council?” I mean, he came onto the bus with his wife and there I suspected him a lot. And we went to the Council. The inspectors at that time were waiting for me at Bajram Kelmendi’s⁴⁸ house. But I didn’t go straight to the house of Bajram Kelmendi, nor entered where the Council was in the yard of the old medresa, but I went...there’s an old house still there, when you turn towards the offices of the government there, and then there’s a road that takes you straight to the medresa’s street. I went by that old house like this {gestures to the right with hand}. And so when I went, I just crossed the street straight four meters and with those four meters, straight to the yard of the Council.

I entered there, I submitted the file. I spoke to Limka about everything. And this woman went to her brother there, then she said, “Here’s the phone, call me from the Council, and when we leave, we leave together to go to Drenas.” In that moment a colleague of the Council comes, he worked at the Council, he was quite old, Ismet, but I don’t recall his surname and he says, “I swear to God, you girl, Zahrije, the Council has been surrounded by police inspectors,” continues, “and they are looking for a girl with curly hair.” And I had my hair long, you know, up to here {shows the length of her hair}, I had my hair all curly, all... and I was young then, all different. There was no other girl with curly hair, except me (smiles). Right there, Ibra says to me, Ibrahim Makolli, “What business do they have with Zahrije? Zahrije has a low rank.” Do you understand? They were not aware who was being followed, what kind of assignments I undertook and how I was being followed and how the police, for example, knew my movements well.

⁴⁶ Colloquial: similar to the English bro, brother.

⁴⁷ *Burrënore*, when a woman has so-called more masculine features. Used to describe a woman who’s not conventional in the sense of stereotypical gender roles.

⁴⁸ Bajram Kelmendi (1937-1999) was a lawyer and human rights activist. He filed charges against Slobodan Milošević at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in 1998. On the first day of the NATO war in 1999, Serb police arrested him with his two children Kastriot and Kushtrim. Their bodies were found the next day.

And they said, “If someone has to be taken away, I am the Secretary of the Council, Behgjet Shala, you are a member of the Chairmanship, *bac Adem*⁴⁹ the director,” he said, “they should take us with high ranks, they have no business with Zahrije.” “So, Zahrije, have you eaten?” I said, “No, I haven’t.” “Come, there is a burek shop near the Council, let’s eat a burek.”

They had gotten those cameras ready for me, but I was waiting for the photos, for copies of the photos. They said, “Do you want to take them with yourself?” I said, “Why yes, let them remain as proof for me as well, to have a copy while I wait for the photos to be developed.” “The photos will be developed very quickly, they won’t take longer than 15 minutes.” He said...because they sent our film there, he said, “Take the copies of the photos with yourself, we’ve prepared the cameras, uniforms, we got them all ready. We’ll accompany you by car to Grabovc. The KLA army is there from Grabovc onwards and they’ll take you to the general staff where you’ll take the uniforms.”

When I stopped, you know, I got rid of the phone numbers I had of the zone there. All the numbers I had, the entire notebook with the phone numbers of soldiers, of the general staff, all of them. And...I gave them to Limka – Halime Morina, we called her Limka. And I just took the Serbian identification card in my pocket. When we were out, they ambushed me, the inspectors came right to me and all of the sudden started searching me, thinking I have a weapon and that I am armed. I took out only my ID and they looked at it, and now Behgjet, they didn’t want to take him, for sure... Ibrahim Makolli and me, yes. But about Ibrahim Makolli they thought he was Agron Ramadani. Because they [the police] through the phone... when Agron spoke with the Llausha Brigade, the phones were tapped.

And in that moment, when they took Ibrahim and me, they put us in the car and they closed the doors and he notified the main station there, the 92, he said, in Serbian, and I understood right away, he said, “We took Zahrije and Agron Ramadani.” I knew they didn’t know that Ibra was Ibrahim Makolli, but they thought he was Agron Ramadani, because in their physiognomy both are blonde, similar. This Ibrahim Makolli was a minister for...emigration...migration.

Jeta Rexha: Foreign affairs?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: Yes, foreign affairs.⁵⁰ He was a member of the Council then. And now, they sent us to the station, to the 92, and they put us in rooms. One in room number one, the other in room number two. First they put Ibra in, they sent me to room number two. And here he said, “Now you stay here, wait, because we’re going

⁴⁹ Adem Demaçi (1936-) is 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.

⁵⁰ Ibrahim Makolli (1968-) was never Minister of Foreign affairs, her was Minister for Diaspora from 2011 through 2014.

to celebrate, because we have got Shotë Galica⁵¹ in the police [station].” And there all the police, they took Ibra away for questioning, and the police came in one by one, they opened my door and took off their hats and said to me, “*Gde si, Shote Galica?*” [Where are you Shotë Galica?] (laughs). He said, “Today we have a celebration, we’re going to celebrate that we caught you because we’ve been looking for you for a long time and you fell into our hands alive.” And I just stood there, with my attitude, *trrak*, and God sent me the strength to laugh...(laughs), I don’t know how to explain how. And when they put us in the car, I to Ibra, I touched him on the knee like this, and I looked at Ibra, I didn’t know, I didn’t know Pristina. For example, I knew how to go the Reporting Office of the Democratic League of Kosovo, to the bus station, the hospital...some centers like this, but not everything, for example all the streets like the people who are Pristina locals.

And now, they, in the car, taking us towards Tokbahçe. Now Ibra was thinking, “God, what did she do?” Then, after I was freed from jail, he said to me, “Now, they’re going to take us away to execute us by shooting and God knows what Zahrije did,” (laughs), “that they’re taking us this way, because I knew it wasn’t the 92.” They took us through Tokbahçe, they took us on a stroll and they brought us to the 92 station. And I [gestured] to Ibra...you know, “Ibro?” {touches knee}. He said to me, “Don’t touch me, don’t touch me in the car” {touches knee}.

There Ibra was afraid that they were taking us away somewhere to be shot. I not at all, I had a kind of calm in myself, a kind of strength and somehow a smile on my face, God strangely sent me that smile and strength. They came to me and said, “We freed your colleague, you remain here, because you know where you put your head,” I mean, you entered the Kosovo Liberation Army and according to them, that was the wrong path. He said, “Your colleague is freed.” And there they asked me about Agron Ramadani, I absolutely refused to give any information about him. “Do you know him, or something? Where you there?” I didn’t admit anything, even though they knew everything because they had spied on him, because Agron had a phone at home, and they, in the zone of Llausha, had a phone, they all telephones. And they abused me physically with a wooden rod, with a rubber baton, with slaps, until I fainted. They got me all wet with water, then they threw water on me.

At twelve at night, they tried to release me, “Leave!” with threats, “Get out of the station! Get out of the station!” I said, “I won’t leave.” He said, “Why won’t you leave?” He said, “I want to go to my wife.” I said, “Go to your wife, go to your wives, this is a state building, I will stay here. If I need to leave in the morning, I’ll go in the morning, I don’t have where to go at night.” “Go, go!” “Very well,” I said, “I have an aunt here in Pristina, is it possible to give me the phone to call her husband to come get me at the station.” “No,” he said, “you don’t have the right to the phone.” I knew it wasn’t a lie that they would release me, but they wanted to abuse me and get me out of the station, because our colleague, a Xhevat Bylykbashi, when they arrested him, I mean, like this, they forced him out of the station at one in the morning and then arrested him a second time, and they put a sack on him so he’d lose track. He was arrested with Xhema Binaku, but he was lucky that people intervened on Xhema’s behalf.

⁵¹ Shotë Galica, born as Qerimë Halil Radisheva, was an Albanian insurgent fighter and the wife of Azem Bejta, the leader of the *Kaçak* (outlaws) movement. Galica participated in dozens of attacks against Royal Yugoslav forces in the beginning of the 20th century and the *Kaçak* movement succeeded to put under their control temporary free zones.

I mean people intervened, they got them out through personal connections, then the inspectors argued amongst themselves why was one released because personal connections, and not the other one. And because of Xhema, Xhevat too was released.

And I imagined the incident, and that their purpose was to recreate Xhevat's case. They categorically, "Get out!" I still have the decision they prepared at midnight, when they forced me to sign it. "Get out," they said, "you're done, now go home." It was exactly one at night, from twelve until one. "Get out, get out!" I didn't accept it at all, "I won't leave the building. These aren't your buildings, this is a state building and you can go to your homes. I'm not bothering anyone here. The guard is [here]...and I won't go outside, I don't accept it at all." They saw that I was categorically determined, and I was in a very bad state. I was very tired and abused. They, again, they interrogated me, they interrogated me, never a minute [of rest], all night, they didn't let me sleep for about three days.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Were they Albanians or Serbs?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: No, they were Serbs, but they spoke Albanian very clearly. There was inspector Behanke, he was previously an inspector in Drenas as well. There was inspector Perić, and another man who was their inspector, I don't know his name. I mean, they asked about the activists, about the commanders, about Fehmi Lladrovci, about Jakup Krasniqi, about Shaban Shala. "Is Jakup Krasniqi in the KLA?" I said, "He isn't." He said, "How isn't Jakup Krasniqi?" I said, "He isn't, I've never seen him in uniform," I said, "and the army needs healthy young men, professor Jakup is old and sick from diabetes, a political prisoner. He isn't in the KLA." And, yes, he asked me about Shaban Shala, he said, "Why did Shaban Shala flee with a car to Potërk...when...why did he flee? He was uniformed, he was armed, why did he run away and leave the car in Potërk?" I said, "No, he wasn't in uniform either, but he didn't have a driver's license." "No, it isn't true," he said, "and is this him?" "No it isn't." They insisted, "No it isn't." I refused, then they beat me, and so on...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What happened then?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: About Fehmi too, they tormented me a lot over Fehmi and Xhevë too. It's even, even written in my indictment (laughs). When I said to them, "I die with the regret of never having seen Fehmi and Xhevë Lladrovci." And that's what it says in my indictment too (laughs).

And for roughly three days they kept me in the station abusing me, interrogating me, never letting me rest. I myself didn't know that I was that strong and that I could withstand sleeplessness like that. I didn't believe it, but there I proved what old men say, "A human is stronger than stone." And the rod, the ways they tortured me...(cries) with two hands on the table...until...until I started bleeding." I'm sorry...(cries).

And there, after the three days that they kept me here, after all that abuse, after all the questions, they sent me to Lipjan, to the Lipjan prison. And when I went there, they took me to the prison late. On the way they said to me, "No let's throw you out here, no, let's throw you out here, let's kill you here." In different forms, "No, you'll

never get out of prison.” All sorts of threats, all sorts of words. And before getting to Lipjan {wipes tears}, he said, “We’re done with you, but if don’t want to stay in prison, you have three offers. Your first offer, if you wish, will get you a passport and deport you to whatever country you want, we’ll remove you, just for you not to go back to Drenica.” I said, “No, I’ll never go abroad, because I won’t leave my country. I don’t have a reason to go abroad.” He said, “Very well, your second offer is to live here in Pristina. Your aunts are here, if you cooperate with us you’re free from prison.” I said, “I’ll never accept this either. Even if I knew I were never to leave prison, because this offer is to work against my people never, I don’t accept it.” And, “The third offer,” he said, “you have, there are three of us here, if you accept to come with us to the cafeteria,” and he directly said, “to sleep with us.” I said, “No, I didn’t protect my virginity for you,” I said, “or for you to make me lose my virginity to be freed from prison,” I said, “my life is worthless, if to be freed from prison, after ten years of activism, an activism done all with men because there were no women, I fail with you in the end, I’ll never accept it. I’d sooner accept death than the condition you present to me.” “Very well,” he said, “it’s not a problem, you remain in prison until you age, and we’ll send you to the women’s prison in Lipjan.” And they sent me to the women’s prison in Lipjan.

In the late hours of the afternoon, when I went there, a nurse checked me up, she said, “Come to the doctor for a check up.” And she made me get undressed there, she saw the state I was in, and said to them, “She has nothing,” she said, “she’s very well, healthy as an apple, get up to get cleaned up.” I went to the bathroom, I got cleaned up, they gave me pajamas and some clothes of some prisoner, bad ones, until my clothes were cleaned, the pants and blazer that were mine. And then, staying there, staying there, after a time, after I got cleaned up, my hair completely dried, they put me in room number one with Behare Tavallari. Behare was from Prizren, there were three students there, who were arrested a month or two before me, May 20, I think of ‘98, and me on June 8. And there, I heard them in the corridor talking, this Nadica Bošković and a Sladjana Arcić, both were from Lipjan. I learned their names afterwards, I found documentation under the stairs where they had the names of all of the guards and I read them there, because they were referred to mostly with pseudonyms, and with short names. And I learned their names there, from that registry under the stairs in the corridor that I found in the prison, the names of the guards.

They took me out and beat me in the corridor and then they put me in the room and left me. Then I slept, they came and monitored me regularly throughout the night until I went to Lipjan, all the doors were open for the prisoners. The moment I went, I mean, the discipline changed, they changed with everyone, because in prison they treated me like the most dangerous person. I mean, the most dangerous woman of all the women. At a certain point, I even started upsetting the Albanians, I’m sorry to say it, because they said to me, “When you weren’t in prison, we had a good time. The moment you came, we’re suffering. Because of you they lock our doors with bars and keys, because they didn’t lock us up like this. We communicated among ourselves, all the doors were open.” And, there, the guardian said to me, she said, “We’ve been waiting for you for three days.” I mean, my arrest had been planned.

And I want to mention an incident, during questioning when I was in the 92, the inspector spoke to someone directly in Drenas in Albanian...he spoke Albanian with them, he listened to them on the phone because the voice could be heard on the telephone while he was talking to me. And, he came...the next morning a guard

came, a certain Sanije, a guard, she was Albanian. And there I said to her, I said, “Can I tell you something in confidence and are you trustworthy?” She said, “Yes.” I said, “If possible you must absolutely send word to the Council for the Protection of Right and send word to Agron Ramadani to leave, they will arrest him because they were in the know about everything.” They had tapped his phone. Because during my torture I didn’t admit anything, they played the phone recording when Agron spoke directly to the main staff there. And they said, “We sent Zahrije to get arms.” And when they tortured me and pressured me [to say], “You are a soldier of the Kosovo Liberation Army with the pseudonym *Malësorja*,”⁵² I didn’t admit anything, they presented me with the photo of me that they took when they photographed me at the bus station. And they said to me, “Do you know them? Who is she?” I said, “Me.” “And this other?” I said, “I don’t know her.” They described her to me, “She’s thin, she wears jean clothing, she has a slight build,” “I don’t know who she is, nor where she is!” I said, “You freely kill me, because I don’t know anything about her.” And it was a fact that I didn’t know.

And for three months straight during my stay in the Lipjan prison, they either came and interrogated me from ten in the morning, or in the evening from seven until ten, eleven, sometimes they interrogated me until twelve for about three months straight. The bread on the table in the evening, when it was dinner time, bread was left like that, uneaten, while I was being interrogated. All the women ate, I was being interrogated, being abused psychologically and physically. The abuse I experienced in the Lipjan prison was ongoing.

For one instance I’m deeply grateful to Behare Tavallari, she smoked cigarettes and I didn’t, I never liked tobacco. And she smoked these cigarettes with Lucky Strike written on them, and there in the middle they have the red color with the black letters. And now, the devil struck me, because when you’re a soldier and passionate about an activity, and I said, I put two fingers over the cigarette and I said to her, “Look, look, the symbol of the KLA, U-Ç-K just a Ç and a little sign there and, UÇK.” And Behare, “We’ll cut them then,” and we cut two packs of cigarettes, one her, one me and with three letters each, I in my pocket, but Behare, what does she do now? When they take us out for a walk, she goes and puts the part of... the bag that’s plastic, and covers the pack of cigarettes. And I put that red part with black letters and she wrote on the paper, her friend Jehona who was in the other room had her birthday. And she said, “I’m wishing her a happy birthday.” And she wrote there may you turn 120 years old, happy birthday and so on. And she’s writing her with a pen...with a match not a pen, we didn’t have pens, with a match.

And now, when we went out to walk at twelve, when it was time, they take you out to do two-three turns on the walking space. And Suzana went, she had a small build, from Batusha, a Serb, but I don’t remember her last name, I just remember her name was Suzana, she had a small build. She smoked and she certainly went to steal cigarettes because she always stole them, any time they took us out for a walk she used the opportunity to steal cigarettes from the prisoners. And now, she goes there to take the cigarettes, however, when she looks at them,

⁵² Feminine of *Malësorë*. Literally mountain people but it can also be used to refer to people from *Malësia*, or *Malësi e Madhe* (literally Great Highlands), 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.

she notices it. And I swear, in a matter of seconds, she just opened the window and called out, “Come directly inside, urgently to the room.” And Behare said, “*Kuku*, they found my letter.”

She wrote, “I want to say, to beg the guard because it’s Jehona’s birthday, can she send her this letter,” you know, not to give it to her in an illegal way, because there was no way. Because they watched us, I mean, when they took us out for walks they watched us, when they brought you they watched you; there was no way to communicate. We just took an opportunity when there was an Albanian guard, for example. There, they could have used the chance to send women spies and give some information and talk to them about something while cleaning the corridors, whoever’s turn it was, the rooms were assigned the task of cleaning the corridor in order.

When we went there, she brought two white pages, two pens, she said, “Write the declaration, that the letter is yours and Behare’s,” she said, “and that the KLA is yours because you are the KLA.” And now, my indictment said that I was a soldier of the Kosovo Liberation Army with the pseudonym *Malësorja*, and now they read the indictment, they knew my activities. And they called me, “*Xhevë UÇK*.” Imagine, the director came with his men when they took me out to to walk and watched me while I walked, because never, with all that abuse, I never walked with my head down. And men mention it to me today, a man from Shtime even said, “That one with her head high, she can only be from Drenica, because look at ours,” because he had his two daughters there, and these others were there. You know, “Look at these, ours. She can only be from Drenica, because only she holds her head high,” he said to our boys from Drenica and in prison.

And now, I said, “I won’t write it. Why should I write it?” She didn’t find it on me. Now when she went down, we came to an agreement with Behare. Behare said, “Zahrije, as far as beating us goes, they’ll beat both of us, don’t admit it...don’t write the declaration. I have no choice but to write it, because it was found in my cigarettes” (laughs). “They know you don’t smoke, and as far as beatings go, you’re already getting beaten every day, I’ve never been beaten, I’ll try it this time.” Because they hadn’t abused these new ones, they hadn’t physically abused any of them. Behare was abused for the first time, that time.

However, they felt sorry for me, I felt sorry for Behare and now Behare said, “Don’t you dare write that declaration, for him to take your declaration for as long as they didn’t find it. Where is yours, Zahrije?” I took out the hand I had in the pocket of my sweatpants, I said, “I have it here, in my pockets.” And now, looking at the pocket, it wasn’t noticeable, because it was a thinly ripped paper. And now, when she came up, Behare wrote it, how did I write it, “I have a friend, her birthday is today, and I wrote it for the guard to give it to her, to pass it to her through the guard.” And they took it, “No, you said, ‘Long live Brigade 120 of the KLA,’ you wrote it in codes...” I mean, they took (laughs) an army zone, with a brigade, with the number 120...and the KLA.

“Write down,” she said, “with the KLA.” I said, “I won’t write it! Did you find it on me? No. I don’t smoke. Why should I write it? I won’t and won’t write it!” I said. “*More*, write it,” pressure and...threats and I refused to write it. Behare wrote it, they took that paper of Behare’s, they took my empty one, with no writing. And what did they do? The supervisor came and called an Albanian who is in charge of the prison in Lipjan. They, the prisoners there who were from Drenas, told me she was in charge, because I had never been there. When I went that way

the first time, when we were going to a seminar in Pristina, we went through Lipjan. The first time I noticed the Lipjan prison I almost fainted there, passing by that way was so difficult for me, you can't imagine.

And now, she said to her, "Beat her," and the director... I tried to tell her, "Don't beat her. Be careful because you're making a mistake, don't beat her. You don't have to," I said. I said the whole time, "Take off the uniform, why are you coming to work here with *shkije*?⁵³ Albanians have enough bread to support you." And I think her husband worked abroad. Because [she had] a lot, a uniform and gold sticking to her neck {touches neck}. And there, she agreed to beat Behare, and she beat her. And I felt spite that an Albanian beat her. Then, the second time, the other guard beat her, that Nadica I think, yes Nadica beat her because she said, "This Albanian, she roughed you up only a bit." And it was true, and Behare said, "Oh Zahrije, she hit me, but she didn't hit me as hard as they did, but just to follow orders. She hit me lightly." "She shouldn't have followed her order to beat Albanians, she shouldn't have beaten you." And I said, "You should have grabbed her club, you should have beaten her with it," I said to her. "No," she said, "not at all, she hit me a little, whatever, forget them."

And now, from the stress caused by the abuse, she had never been abused before, and was a young girl straight from the faculty, you know, the first year of the faculty, from school straight here, and then she urinated on herself (laughs). She urinated on herself when she was beaten. And she changed all her clothes there, her body was covered in bruises when the *shkina*⁵⁴ hit her the second time. And that's what this incident was like. I'm very grateful [to Behare] for this incident, the only occasion in which I escaped without a beating. Because she took it upon herself, because she said, "They beat you often, they abuse you, I have never been beaten. And they will beat me either way, but at least you'll be spared this time." And so on...but every month straight they abused me at the Lipjan prison.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Where did you go after the Lipjan prison?

Zahrie Podrimqaku: On December 25, I was convicted in Pristina, my trial was held, they sent me.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: This in the year 19...?

Zahrie Podrimqaku: '98. On December 25, 1998, I mean, I went to trial in Pristina there, and they had also arrested Agron Ramadani. I found out there that they had arrested him. Even though Agron was in Gllanasella the moment I was arrested, he went to Drenica. And Fehmi begged him, Fehmi Lladrovci, "Stay, don't go, because they'll arrest you since Zahrije was arrested, she fell into their hands and everything." He got up and left. And he could have escaped his arrest, stay in Drenica for example. But he got up and left, "No, because they might cause my family problems, they might cause problems for my family because of me, since my family is in Pristina, at least let them deal only with me." In fact, he goes home, they go and arrest him right away.

⁵³ *Shka* (m.); *shkinë* (f.), plural *shkijet*, is a derogatory term in Albanian used for Serbs.

⁵⁴ See above footnote 7.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: You?

Zahrie Podrimqaku: And I, the trial was held that day. We went out to the trial, Lirije Osmani was my lawyer, Ahmet Gjinovci, the second. I had Dastan Rukić, three lawyers, all three were activists in the Council. The inspectors asked me, “Do you want a Serb lawyer?” I said, “Even if I knew I was to never go through this door, because you arrested me, you beat me, you abused me, you killed my brothers,” I said, “you kill Albanians every day, and you protect me? With me there is absolutely no chance, even if I knew today you would release me from prison, I would not take a Serb lawyer.”

And the three Council activists, meaning the Council engaged them for me. I’m grateful to them and thank them a lot. They visited me a lot, however, later they arrested Dastan (laughs). And a colleague in the room told me, while they were taking him to the doctor, [because] they had abused him that badly, she said...while I was...you know, not convicted, before the time of the trial came, they had arrested Dastan. Now Dastan couldn’t come to the trial, only Lirije and Ahmet came, just those two. And she said, “Zahrije, the lawyer...” “Why, why isn’t he coming?” she said, “No I swear, he’s here, they’re taking him to the doctor.” She said, a colleague there in the room, “It’s Dastan.”

And on December 25, when the trial was held, there at the trial and my indictment today says when they interrogated me, that I belong to a terrorist group...I, a terrorist. And they asked, “Whose citizen are you?” I said, “A citizen of the Republic of Kosovo” (smiles). They said, “Where is that Republic of yours?” I said, “For the first time in my life I’m very happy that I was paid by the Municipal Committee for Financing. I received a wage, regardless of how little it is for me, it’s very large, just because for the first time in my life I received my first wages from the Republic of Kosovo.”

The police almost went insane there, and the court, and all the judges there. There was a woman prosecutor and a police officer turned to my uncle, because they held me once, my parents came, but they sent me to the police station tied up and it failed, because they had lost the keys to those cuffs, and the trial failed because they couldn’t find them, and now, they didn’t have the right to try you if your hands were tied at the trial. The second time, my parent couldn’t come, only my uncle came and participated. And Agron’s entire family was there, his father’s maternal uncles were all present. And when she said, she said, “She belongs to a terrorist group...this is a terrorist army...they are criminals,” and that prosecutor said everything there about our army.

I said, “I’m very happy I belong to the Kosovo Liberation Army, and I do not recognize this court of yours” (laughs). All of this is written in my indictment too. They, in that moment...Agron gave his statement, but gave it in Serbian. I didn’t know Serbian, I understood it here and there, but to follow the whole event, no. And now during the trial, when he gave his interview in Serbian, Lirije said to me, she said, “Zahrije, he’s implicating you, he said Zahrije put me into a meeting that was held in Dobroshevc, where he was with *bac* Adem. Since then she forced me into the KLA, with violence. She threatened me and I had no choice but join.” She said, “Get up and challenge him.” I said, “No, I won’t object.” She said, “He’s making the indictment more severe.” I said, “Oh, he is married, he’s a father of children. Let them release him today. I’ll take on all of it, because he’s my brother. I

won't get up and object. If there's a need I'll serve his jail time as well, because I won't leave anyone worse off. I don't have children at home, one body of a person, may I not die where I fall," I said, "*bac Adem* used, often used this expression. And my father has plenty of girls and boys, I've chosen my path, I have to follow it until the end."

On the way, the guard, while taking me to the Lipjan prison, threatened me saying to me, "You are for the Kosovo Republic? You're for Kosovo Republic? The KLA?" And I didn't make a sound at all. When they sent me to Lipjan, inside, she put me in the cell, she went and talked to the guard there and went right away and took me out and put me, she laid me out in the hallway. "This," she said, "is for Kosovo the Republic" (laughs). What to do? And so on...

Now, even though I was convicted, the abuses were still the same, there was absolutely no difference because there was a conviction...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: How long was it?

Zahrie Podrimqaku: I was sentenced to four years and in the second degree, even though the lawyer made an appeal, I mean regardless, not a day was taken off my sentence. The same court decision came to me confirmed, so, the moment when...but during my stay in Lipjan, about three days, the coldest time, you know, September, October, November, they sent me, I stayed with children on concrete without light, without windows. Before going to court this happened. And there, it was that cold, with some blankets like the kind they cover horses with, that kind. I'd go to sleep with sweatpants on, with all the clothes, the way I was dressed and [even] with that it was too cold. From the cold, I had great pain, I had rheumatism and hiccups. It became like a sickness for me, it upset me a lot, I thought it would stay with me my whole life, but it left me, I got rid of it. When I went to Pozharec, I got rid of it.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: When did you go to Pozharec?

Zahrie Podrimqaku: On June 10, '99. And here now, after three months, when I left, my eyes had reddened, all blood inside because it was totally dark. I mean, there was no light at all, and it is cold in the basement, except for when the guards came to bring me food, you had no one else there. When the hiccups started bothering me, and they bothered me a lot, there was this Dastan Thaçi who worked in, they called it *vesheraj*,⁵⁵ there in prison, where the prison clothes are washed in the machine. And he certainly was a free type, convicted in the second degree, and simply put he had money, whoever wanted to enter into an agreement with them, infiltrated easier. But I didn't want to ever make an agreement with them. I treated them as enemies, and they treated me just like an enemy (laughs) there as well.

⁵⁵ Serbian = laundry room.

And he talked about windows, I heard him saying, when the hiccups bothered me, he said, “Oh, have strength, because we’re almost, almost, out. Oh, have strength,” he said. When they took me out of isolation, because my time was coming close, they probably had the time, when I was going to trial earlier, and they were taking me to court, when they sent me to the cell, in the morning came...there was a Nadica, an old woman, a guard. As far as beatings go, she never beat me, not at all. Yelling and threatening and so on yes, but she never hit me, of all the other guards, she never did hit me. And she said, she came, she opened [the door], it was her turn to clean the room. In prison they clean the building in turns, the female prisoners [clean] the rooms in turns, and she said, she said, “Come on, it’s your room’s turn to get cleaned today,” she said to them. Mevlyde Saraçi, a certain Kumrije Vocaj from Mitrovica was there, she was psychologically sick, like...simply put, she was a quiet type, but could become aggressive in a moment.

And now I didn’t remember which of the women were there, simply put, it was the three of us. It was dark, only my pupils could be seen a bit, and out of loneliness, when they removed me, a certain Lumturije Ferizi intervened, she was in because of her business, it was bankrupting, Azem Vllasi was her lawyer. And she...this Azem Vllasi dealt with the director of the prison and she intervened with Azem to remove that girl from Drenica from isolation because, “It’s sinful, they only abuse her and they are killing her.” She said, “She’s very young and I feel sorry for her.” And yes, because they asked me, they said, “What’s Azem Vllasi to you?” I said, “Nothing.” “Do you know him?” I said, “I’ve only seen him on television.” I said.

But then I remember that Lumturije, when they went to clean the women in isolation, came and opened [my cell] and said to me, “If I stay alive, I’ll never allow that there is no intervention to get you out of here.” And now, because when they took me out they asked me. When they opened the door of the isolation [cell] they asked me, “What’s Azem Vllasi to you?” I said, “He’s nothing to me.” “Do you know him?” “I’ve only seen him on television, nowhere else.” And there I heard that he intervened.

Then I finished the trial there, then they freed Mevlyde. I don’t remember the occasion, I think they freed her in January of ‘99...or they freed her at the end of November ‘98, I don’t remember the occasion when they freed her, I just remember it was snowing with sleet, and so on, with rain, when they freed Mevlyde. And I was left in the room alone with Kumrije, the sick one. But even earlier, when I went, the moment I left, I spent a short amount of time with Abetare. Then, I had Gjyke Memaj in my cell.

After Gjyke was released I had a Serb. No, they had put Gjyke in the other cell, before releasing her, and they brought a Serb to my room. I mean, for a long time I stayed with this Serb who was there for murder, she had killed a certain Asllan, an old man from Ferizaj. I had her in my room. And through her, the guards abused me enough. Yes, and then after Mevlyde left, through this Kumrije. They forced her to say to me, “As soon as you fall asleep, I’ll choke you.” And she now...we had visits, she never did, she had killed her own brother with tongs when he was an underage child, and then they brought her there. And she remained there, and her family refused to take her from then on.

Now, they manipulated her, they manipulated her all the time, and she said to me, she said, “As soon as you fall asleep, I’ll choke you.” I had to give her everything father brought me to eat, oranges, apples, everything I had, just to treat her nicely. And on one occasion, a bad thought entered my mind and I said she’s an imbecile, a fool, she doesn’t know and that’s why they work with her, they’re grooming her. And I worried as I slept, I saw in a dream, “You want to choke me.” I screamed.

And another incident, in one incident this Nadica, she pushed me to bother her and I slapped her. But to be honest, I hit her because I couldn’t stand it and I threatened her. And then she came and brought me a piece of paper, “Write down that you beat her.” I refused, “It isn’t true that I beat her.” And I didn’t admit that I had beaten her. “Write it!” *Bre* this, *bre* that, “Write it!” I absolutely refused to write it, and she caught me and abused me then, this Nadica. And there was nothing I didn’t say to her, I said, “Do you have children? Do you...?” I heard that she had a child with disabilities at home, and when I mentioned it to her she took it very badly. I said...and they, as far as children go, Serbs are very sensitive when you touch them [on the topic of their children]. And because of her, working with her, with this Kumrije Voca, I mean, they abused me through her.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Then the NATO bombings happened.

Zahrije Podrimqaku: Yes, then...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Where you in prison at that time?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: Now, when the NATO bombings happened, they put me in a cell with Iliriana Jaha. Iliriana Jaha was also there for murder, and she was their collaborator. So, during my stay in the Lipjan prison, these Serbs stole as much livestock as they could from Albanian families. I mean, they stole chickens, roosters, birds, they stole everything there. Believe me, the animals could be heard, the cows mooing, their mooing sounded human. And these, this Vera with this Iliriana, went, and a young lady who was there for murder, she had also killed her husband. She was a criminal type, I can say freely, and say it with full responsibility. They had not a crumb of mercy towards us because we were Albanian. They went, took cows, cooked them in the kitchen for Serbs, when Serbs went to war zones in Drenica and in other villages, in Shtime and in other cities where they were sheltered and slept.

And during this incident they told them that Zahrije too has a family, she belongs to a large family, he had cows and goats in the family, her grandfather, and there’s no task Zahrije doesn’t know how to do. And they come and try, this Sladanja with Nadica try to get me to go and milk cows and I categorically refused. I said, “You can kill me, you can kill me, because I haven’t come here to serve you.” And I refused to go.

Now, during the bombings, I was in a cell with Iliriana. When the day of the bombings happened on March 24, 1999, on the same day, meaning in the evening, the bombings started. Before it got dark in the afternoon, from a window in the distance, because you didn’t dare get close at all, one could see this Iliriana brought a new girl with curly hair. I mean, she was a certain Dhurata Berisha, a journalist they had captured in the zone of Llap. And

they confiscated her cameras, everything she had, recordings, everything and brought her straight there. When they brought her to the Lipjan prison, that night there, they took off all her clothes, the way her mother made her, and they physically abused her in a way you can't imagine. And it was all heard upstairs because the wall had thin acoustic, all the conversations were heard. They said, "Even the walls have ears in prison, and eyes." And after her abuse they asked the supervisor, a certain Liliana was the Serb supervisor there and they said to her, "In which cell to put this terrorist?" She said, "Send her to the most dangerous room, you know, to the other terrorist." To my cell.

And they brought her to my room with me and Ilirana. That night Behare was in a bad state, she had temperature and chills, she was abused so badly you can't imagine. I thought all the time, in fear, what if she passes, what if she dies in prison that night. I asked her, "Behare, how are you?"

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Behare or Dhurata?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: This Dhurata. "Dhurata, how are you?" "Oh, bad," she said. "I'm Zahrije, and I'm freezing." She was just dressed in a pair of pajamas and totally undressed and barefoot as they took all her clothes to wash them, she was only wearing pajamas. There I said, "Wait because I'm wearing two pairs of pajamas," because one had to dress thickly to protect oneself a bit from the clubs. Meaning if a rubber rod were to hit you...when it fell on thin clothes it could take your skin off too. And... I know I was a speck in their eye, for maltreatment, whenever they wanted to have fun, they had me. They didn't have other women. Because they didn't abuse other women.

And before Dhurata, I forgot to point out the incident, but here I want to finish with Dhurata. I gave her the pajamas and she wore them, and then later on regularly, I asked her questions because I couldn't sleep. And I said to her, "Dhurata, are you OK?" She said, "Zahrije, I'm warmed up now, you saved me with these pajamas." And here, Shaha Isafi from Gjakova came before Dhurata. Today she's a police officer in Gjakova. She's my very good friend who's a very loyal friend and was brave. And she told us that we had to know during the night, when the bombing started, I mean, the women cleaning her room told her and she said, "We are the victors, the issue of Kosovo is going very well. The foreigners have come here and the bombing will start on the 24th." I mean, we already knew the date when it would start, because Shaha notified us. And that night in the prison when the bombing started, all the police, all the personnel, all of them with the guards, with everyone, they all looked for mouse holes to hide in (laughs). They went to the basement of the prison. And they locked our doors with bars and keys and everything they could, they left us locked up.

Dhurata now, everyday, the moment that night, after they abused Dhurata, they also abused Shaha, Shaha Isafi. They took me out as well, they abused me, I mean, that night the bombing started. Everyday during the bombing they abused me, Dhurata, and Shaha. Thank God, Dhurata [was abused] for five days, I mean until Friday, she didn't end up staying longer because she was a journalist, probably the Red Cross and the internationals intervened and they released her. She was released, but we were afraid, I never had faith that she could be alive. I said, as soon as she left the prison, they just killed her somewhere, or at some checkpoint, or

they stopped her, or they abused her. And Dhurata is in America now, I'm happy that she has managed also to get married, she has children. I communicate with her as well.

And after Dhurata's release, they regularly abused Shaha and me. Imagine, they didn't even spare Igballe Xhafa who was pregnant, from Ferizaj. But they didn't abuse her body, they abused her hands because they were afraid that she was registered by the International [Red] Cross, by the International Red Cross that she was pregnant and...But they also gave some baton [blows] to her hands. And Shaha and me, regularly for two weeks without stopping. Believe me, until the prison team came with the director, and went into all the rooms. I feel bad for everyone who was a colleague of mine and in general for the women because not all the women had the courage to tell the truth. The director came in, who knows, he was with some delegation that sent him to visit the prison and so on, "How are you doing?" "Good." "How are you doing?" "Good." "How are you doing?" "Good." When he came to my room, when he entered my room and said, "How are things, how are you doing?" I said, "What do you mean 'How are you doing?'" I said, "Why you don't know? Under your orders we are being beaten like cows." "I," he said, "don't know anything." He was serious, quiet, "I don't know anything." I said, "You don't know? No employee of yours can beat a prisoner by law without your orders." I said, "This is your order. You're the person who is abusing us, you come here and patronize us, 'How are you doing?' Because you don't know. You know what we eat, you know what we drink. You also know how many times a day we are abused".

They didn't have...when it became exactly twelve, they turned on the loudspeaker very loud, they increased the volume to the dome of the sky, and around four-five people came up and took out me and Shaha. Because Dhurata was saved, thank God, they tormented her enough, they tormented her hands enough...but we were there.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: After the bombing ended, what happened?

Zahrie Podrimqaku: And now the moment the director was there with that team, I didn't know who that team was that wanted to visit us and [in front of whom] I made a statement like that, but they stopped the abuse. Even today Shaha thanks me, she says, "You came...because with me...they said, 'Good', what can I say, when my colleagues said 'good?'" Now, when your colleague is beaten and you are not physically abused, of course you are also abused psychologically. At least tell the truth, but no, they didn't dare to. Let me remain on good terms with the Serbs and save myself. This is very bad, because when you're connected as a group, you're more powerful, and then no one can break you. But even there there was...and the prison wasn't the same for everyone. Because someone went through prison like this {waves fingers} without a single slap, without being threatened by anyone. But some...took it all on for everyone else, that was my fate.

And...on April 20, yes she came on April 20, they brought doctor Flora Brovina to the prison. And there, when they brought her, the doctor was downstairs being questioned. The moment Sladjana Arcic came and opened my door she said, "A colleague of yours has arrived," she said, "do you know her?" I said, "I don't know her." She said, "Doctor Flora Brovina, how don't you know her?" I know her, but I didn't want her to know I knew her.

Because as far as knowing goes, I knew her, we had her since the beginning when I started my activities, she was at the central level, as the head of the Women's Forum of the Democratic Movement at the time.

And now, there, they brought the doctor, I was in room number one, they put her in room number two because they changed our rooms. They changed them and...they didn't let you, as soon as they saw you had conversations with a colleague, they didn't let [you stay together], especially me, not at all. They put that *shkina* with me, or that sick one. I was never without one or the other in the cell. I had the best moment in the cell when I had Gjyke Memaj when, I mean, I was with Behare in the beginning. When I went, then afterwards they brought Gjyke Memaj, a mother of five children, a housewife, she came to my cell; they put Behare in a cell with Mevlyde Saraçi. And there...I remember the moment she entered, they had abused her because her brother was a soldier, this...Muharrem, the name of her brother, his pseudonym was Giça. He was on the side of Deçan there, because she was married in Zhur, her family is from Junik of Deçan.

And...when she came, when the guard put her in the room, I got up and received her standing. Now, the guard closed the door and I sat her down at the table, I had the juice that my parent brought me during the visit, juices. I put the juice in front of her, I put a box of cookies in front of her. "Eat," I said, "because maybe you're hungry." I introduced myself, "I am this person, this person, an activist, I'm a girl, I've done this work and that's why I'm in prison." And I asked her, "Are you an activist?" "No," she said, "just because of my brother, because they saw me wandering with my brother, they took me." She was upset, she had left her children home. Trying to give her strength, I said to her, I said, "Don't you worry sister Gjyke, you'll be out of her in one month. You're innocent, you didn't do anything, and they'll release you" (smiles).

And now at some point she calmed down, looked at the room {pretends to inspect the room} she said, "Is this prison?" I said, "Yes." I said, "Why, how did you imagine prison?" She said, "I thought in prison they'll send me to some dark cell. We sleep here, on these beds?" She saw the beds with white sheets and tucked in tightly like this, the way they do them in prison, they don't let you do them differently. And now she said, "It's like a hospital in here" (laughs) and here she made me laugh, I'll never forget this occasion. "Here," she said, "it's like being in a hospital" (laughs). I said, "Like a hospital, but a bit different, because in a hospital no one beats you, and here you be careful." I said, "Just don't talk, and you're a housewife, a mother, no one will bother you, I don't believe they'll beat you." And she was treated well, they didn't abuse her. That Lumturia who was released, found her a lawyer. Her husband in Switzerland, he had money, her husband got her out with money. So I was happy when she went home, just because she was a mother of children.

I also had Fatime Boshnjaku, she was an English professor, I also had her in my cell. But they didn't leave her for long, because they saw we were getting along well. Because she was an intellectual, she understood my life and I hers, [she was] from Gjakova. And we got along well, but they left us a short time, to say, all of one month...they left us together for one month and a half. And on one occasion she hesitated, I said to her, "Professor, be careful because you are...since you're an activist of *Nëna Tereze*, they will not physically abuse you. Since they didn't abuse you in Gjakova when they took you, the way they abused me in the 92, you'll be treated well here too." "No," she said, "the law is like this." She knew Serbian well and I said, "Oh professor,

there's no law here. I'm telling you here, there is no law. This is wartime. This is a war prison. There's no law here."

And I don't know what, she had something with the guard and said to her, "The law is like this." "The law?" "Yes!" And they took her out and beat her a lot. And she was old, anyway in poor health and I felt very sorry for her. Now, when they abused her, they took her out of my room, they put her in another room. And she served around six months, or seven. In the same way they held Gjyke for around three months, or four, they didn't keep her long. Mevlyde also served six months, they released Mevlyde without a trial, without anything. I joked with her, "Come on, you're with the LDK, they'll release you without a trial" (laughs). And that's really what ended up happening to her. And there, as far as beatings go, they didn't beat Mevlyde either. She wasn't abused either.

So, on June 10 they took us to Pozharevc, that day, without telling us where they were taking us. They woke us up early at five in the morning, and they put us out in the corridor, they tied our hands up with *sigjima* [thin ropes], all the women. And then they put us in our cells again. They said, "We want to remove you from here," but they didn't say where to. These two who went, who worked in the kitchen, the three of them, Vera, Zoja and this Iliriana, they had found out there in the kitchen, and they said, "They're taking us to the Pozharevc prison."

Then, with us staying like that, waiting...wait, wait, wait, hands tied and what do I do, we needed to use the toilet. We had the toilet in our cells. There in the room you had plastic containers filled with some water at the bottom. I mean there you had to urinate...everything, wash your hands, eat there, everything you needed [to do], you had there. We tried to keep it clean ourselves, by putting in shampoo not to have it smell, we tried in other forms to keep ourselves clean where we were.

And now, they, "O *kuku*, how to...?" And I untied my hands. First I took out my hand, I took out mine, I tied the *sigjim* in ways I could put my hands in and remove them easily. And I tied the friends I had in the cell like that, in that form. And I saved them and myself. I said, "Now, when you hear the steps of someone walking on the stairs, or for your needs, remove your hands. When you hear the stairs, just put your hand back in." And we were freed then, because we were in a bad state with hands tied.

When we left for Pozharevc, they lined us up in order, they put me in front even though doctor Flora Brovina was older, they placed me first. However, the doctor was a humanist, different, she had different treatment. For example, she had regular visits in Lipjan, and regular visits in Pozharevc. Her husband came every week, all of them visited. She was informed about her family that it had escaped...where they were. We didn't know...on March 5, '99 when they stopped and forbade visits, we didn't have and didn't know anything. I even thought about my father, I said they killed him on the road and now there's no one who can come. My brother, I know they looked for him, Arsim. Because he helped me a lot and supported me a lot everywhere. They persistently looked for him, Arsim, I know he didn't dare take the road to Lipjan because they wanted to capture him, but they couldn't catch him.

And, I want to mention an incident that's very important. During my stay in the Lipjan prison, before...after I was convicted. And...no, this was before I was convicted. My father's maternal uncle, Adem Bytyqi, sent his son, he has a son in Switzerland and sent this Mehdi Bytyqi, I mean, a relative, the two of them together, to Krajkova, to my father and said to him, "Tell Rama, you will have as much money as you want to release Zahrije from prison." And now, my father told me this in the presence of the guards there. There was a police officer because when visitors came, who were the men of the family, a police officer and the women guards came. And he told me in the presence of the police officer there, he said, "Uncle Adem said just send someone, you never have to return the money but get Zahrije out of prison." You know what I said to my father? I said, "You know what I say to you, father? Thank you for coming to see me, but I told you one hundred times don't come to have my brothers killed, your sisters, for our brother to be killed because of you," I said, "so, I have chosen my path and I want to stay here, and I haven't come here to do business with *shkije*." I said, "If I hear you have given a cent to the Serbs for me," I said, "you'll be without money, and you'll be without a daughter."

And when the lawyers came to visit I said to them, "Be careful, I've contributed, I've worked for the people, and I don't want to take a cent from my father apart from what goes to you for travel expenses." Because lawyers were not paid. And I refused to give money to anyone. And as I was saying, I said, when they took us out of the cells to get us on to buses to Pozharevc there, they said, "Come on Podrimqaku, you lead first." And we went out, a whole army was there in military uniforms, and with police on one side, we walked through them. And there a Serb in a military uniform frowned at us, a soldier from Serbia. And he said, he insulted the law, he said, "Because I know what I would do to them." We got on the bus, they got them on the bus with women and a part of the prisoners who were bandaged, I mean, the wounded, and some of the wounds weren't cleaned and started smelling, and [they] were in a very bad state. They were at the end of the bus, all of us women in the front.

Enver Sekiraqa was also on the bus. He communicated with Afërdita Zeka, she was from Vitimirica in prison with us, but the Serbs never abused her in prison, not at all, not at all, not at all. [They never] threatened her, nor abused her, nothing. Because she had a maternal uncle of her father, I mean, a spy of Serbia, a certain Adem Muja and her father was a *šumar*.⁵⁶ Even I, when they brought her into my cell, she spoke Serbian in the literary dialect, I said, "Do you know them, are they your friends?" I thought that she knew them, she spoke that freely with the guards. She said, "No, I don't know them, but I know their language." I said, "Where did you learn the language?" She said, "We have Montenegrin neighbours and Bosniaks and..." However, she also had her sister married to a Bosniak, but she didn't tell. I heard later, after I left the prison. When we went to her family, I heard her speaking in Serbian to her sister's son. I asked her, "Who is this child? Is he [a child] of Serbs?" "No, he is my sister's. She was married here in the neighborhood to a Bosniak." Simply put, her family was mixed with hem and she lived like a boss in prison. And even though there were no visits, they never threatened her. The father of her maternal uncle was also under protection there, a spy of Serbia, of UDBA,⁵⁷ and so on...

⁵⁶ Serb: *šumar*, forester.

⁵⁷ UDB, *Uprava državne bezbednosti* (State Security Administration).

So, on the bus they stopped at some place to rest the buses, in Niš, as far as I can remember. And there were [people] from Drenica on the bus. And I didn't recognize them because all the boys had shaved heads. And there on the bus I got up and said, "I'm from Drenica," I said, "is there anyone from Drenica here?" A young boy whose name I don't remember got up, I have it written at work there who was on the bus, in a notebook. And I said, "I'm telling you who I am," I said, "I am that girl who worked in Drenica, who gathered the money for teachers in houses, because I was in Likoshan. Do you know me?" "Yes, Zahrije." They with the name, "Zahrije!" (smiles). They knew me, but I didn't recognize them because of their shaved hair and they had lost their physiognomy from the heavy abuse they inflicted on them.

And in Niš, when they stopped, a Serb guard brought us bottles of water. He said, "The women are to drink the water, the men are absolutely forbidden from drinking." And now the moment he brought in the bottles. He said, "Whoever gives [water] to the men, will part badly from us, will be beaten." I took the bottle and said, "I won't drink water in front of the men." I said, "Take the bottle, drink the water and don't worry, I'll take responsibility for it." I decided, they beat me, they beat me, I was used to being beaten, I had been shaped (laughs). And so, I took a risk there and gave the men water, and I didn't leave them without water. And today when I meet them, they mention it in the *oda* and thank me warmly (laughs).

And so, I want to say, Enver Sekiraqa was talking to this Afërdita Zeka and I looked at him because I knew his case, they said they moved and hid their offices and this Vera, this Zoja, and this Ilirana from Peja, said he was [in prison for] rape. He was convicted to eight years for rape, and the rape of Albanian women for that matter, he presented them, students, to Serbs, he tied them to the radiator and raped them. Now, that's what they said in prison. If it was an incident... I just know he was [there] for rape. And she spoke freely with him. Doctor Flora Brovina intervened there and yelled at Afërdita, "Why are you talking to him?" And he addressed Afërdita and said to her, "Who is that sourpuss there who's frowning at me?" It was I.

She said, Afërdita said to him, "She's from Drenica, she's a *drenicake*." Then they sent us to Pozharevc, we got there around ten, or nine in the evening, until they took stock of us all, and they searched all of us. And there, all of us women who left from Kosovo, with political prisoners, with the ordinary [prisoners], we slept in a room that was filled with many beds, one on top of each other, I mean, and we all slept together. Doctor Flora and I had our beds close. I mean, this was the second time I met Flora. One time in the Lipjan prison, when they sent us to kill chickens, they took us out to kill chickens, we met there. And the second time was in Pozharevc, when we slept together that night.

And then the next day these [prisoners] who weren't convicted were sent to custody. They left me with them, there was this... this woman who gave birth to her son in Pozharevc, Igballe Xhafa. And I was with these three ordinary ones here. Meaning, I was the only political prisoner here, the others, they sent the doctor with those other girls there, with those [women] from Shtime, with Zyhrije and this other one whose name I'm forgetting. One was named Zyhrije, the other was Lejla and there were also those girls who were... who also had their fathers in prison, and brothers, and they were beaten a lot.

And during the stay they kept us in one room for one month straight, it was called the Quarantine, they called that prison. And this Igballe who was pregnant, they sent her to that building where the pregnant women stay. I mean, she was separated, alone over there, because she got special food as a pregnant woman from the Red Cross.

And I stayed then just with these three, I was with these three ordinary prisoners in a cell here for one month straight. During one month straight, while I was there there was a guard named Nataša, who was working at the prison there. Around three times a week...three times a day she beat me. And those beatings [were done with] three or four kilograms of keys, all tightly tied, these big prison keys [shows the size]. She would come with these keys, she brought me my breakfast, when she brought my lunch and when she brought my dinner, she beat me. And she made those kitchen workers leave the food on the table. She told these ordinary colleagues of mine who were there, "You sit and eat, she has an issue here with me here." She put me into the other cell and beat me with those keys. As much as I could protect myself, I did. I also, often have problems with my head...health problems. And she said, "Bad information about you came from Kosovo. Because you're a terrorist, a sniper, you killed police officers." And so on...

After a month the International Red Cross came, and there I told the Red Cross. "How are you doing?" "Very bad," I said, "my schedule is three times a day, my schedule is three times a day, three times a week." I mean, so much that our Albanians, even though they were ordinary prisoners there, when the day came that I was scheduled to be beaten almost according to a schedule, like therapy, physical abuse, they said, "What's tomorrow?" Because they were afraid I wouldn't know. "What's tomorrow?" But there was nothing you could do. And believe me, my family engaged a lawyer in Pozharevc, I had Hysni Bytyqi, he was from Suhareka but lived in Belgrade, he was my lawyer. And he went to my family there and told me that, "Your family escaped from the war. They even sent them to Germany since"...and when he told me they took them to Germany in the presence of the guard I said, "They pleased the *shka*, they let go of Kosovo, eh? They made a big mistake!" (laughs). And he said to me, "Shut up, shut up, don't cause problems for yourself...they had no choice, all the people," he said, "left. Not just your family." He said, "They forced them out violently, they were kicked out of their homes."

And...while I was in Lipjan, my father...when he came to visit me, they took him, they took him to Pristina, they tied him up all night to a radiator, they beat him because, "Why are you sending the terrorist food?" And they came to my family, they abused my sister, they beat my mother, my uncle's wife and grandfather. And they abused my grandfather, because of me in prison. And you know what they told my sister? "We can't [beat] Zahrije in prison there, and we're taking revenge on Zahrije."

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Then in 2001...?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: The Red Cross too left that place that was called Quarantine. After that they didn't abuse me physically anymore. They stopped all of the abuse that month. But I had enough psychological abuse because they had me sleep with Serbs. All Serbs in the pavilion, I was the only Albanian. I was never able to sleep

calmly at night. I had to go out, the prison of Pozharevc had almost one hectare, I had to go outside to sleep, to sleep on the grass, and to sleep during the day. I laid down a carton to be able to stay awake at night, because the Serbs told me in every moment, “No, we’re going to kill you, no, we’re going to choke you.”

On one occasion I caught a Serb, I had fallen asleep and I could hear the wood floor in Pozharevc. And now clapping, *krrap-krrap*, because the wood floor was thin, they had washed it with water and I had fallen asleep. When on that moment I saw in a dream that she choked my neck and...{illustrates it}, I almost didn’t wake up, trap, I caught the Serb, she was convicted to twelve years...two hands on my chest. And I said to her in Serbian, because I had learned Serbian in Pozharevc, I learned, I had to because I saw that their women were planning all sorts of scenarios for me. And I had to learn, and they...they didn’t let me have a book, or newspapers, they didn’t let me have anything at all, I didn’t have the right to anything. Just by listening to them talk, and imagining this word means this, this this, that word means this, that’s how I learned Serbian in Pozharevc.

And in Pozharevc, I didn’t mention it there, all the women had their clothes washed, except mine, they took all my clothes. And they just left me with my prison uniform, with a skirt dress, barefoot without socks. Believe me, this young Albanian lady, she had nine pairs of socks and all new in the packaging, unworn. Not these ones she had worn, but these nine pairs that she had not worn. I asked for a pair of these long socks, for women, good ones that are brown, how women bought them back then. And...because I was freezing, cold, she didn’t agree to give them to me, she wouldn’t give them to me under any circumstances. “No,” she said, “because I’ll have a problem with the guard.” I said, “But I will not say that you gave them to me, I’ll say a Serb gave them to me, or I had them somewhere, or...” She didn’t agree to give them to me, because she didn’t agree.

In that moment, when they took us out, a Hata Kurti who was there in Pozharevc for murder, convicted to around twelve years, said to me, “Do you know how to sew?” I said, “Yes.” She said, “I’ll find you a needle, I’ll find you some stocking, they’re ripped at the end, and some socks, I’ll sew them and give them to you.” I said, “Find me needle and thread because as far as sewing goes I’ll sew them.” Now I also got the scissors she got me from the many women who were convicted there in the pavilion. And I took them, I sewed those socks, I sewed those stockings. The socks were long up to here {touches knee}, and the stockings were long up to here {gestures to leg}. I wore them then the whole time until my family got engaged, and they got wind of me from the lawyer, because they didn’t even know I was alive. Someone, “No, they took her out of the Pozharevc prison. No, they killed her in different forms.” Finally, when my brother hired a lawyer, he got the address of that lawyer there in the Council and met with him. He came from Belgrade, he met my brother and he came and visited me. Believe me, then at some point they physically abused the lawyer, he had only a son, a girl, a boy and a wife.

And now there, he respected me a lot, really valued me. And I said to him, “*Bac Hysni*, don’t come!” They had abused him for a long time, he didn’t come at all. When I saw the newspaper, a Serb was lining a garbage can with it, I saw his photo. I said, “Can I look at that newspaper?” When I looked at it, “Uh Zahrije, it’s your lawyer.” When I read it, the abuse, in what order they did it, they had severely abused him, they left the husband and wife for dead in the apartment and then the children intervened, and the Red Cross. And I wrote a letter to him, him

in that condition, when he receives the letter he reads it, he says to his son, “Take me to see Zahrije” (laughs and cries).

And now, when he came to me, God forbid, they had broken his whole skull {touches skull}, he had it wrapped in bandages, and his hand shook like this {shakes hand}. I said, “*Bac* Hysni, you’re in a very bad state, don’t come anymore!” (cries). He said, “As long as blood flows through my veins, as long as they leave this door open to me, *bac* for you and for Nait Hasani, you as a woman and for Nait Hasani as a man, I will never stop,” he said, “because you are really Albanians.” That’s what he said of me. Then, that occasion too, and he couldn’t come.

In the end, yes, another incident, yes...they always sent me packages through the mail, he brought me packages. Can you believe...my package was always distributed six ways as soon as it came. Because I found two in Pozharevc, Albanians, who were in for murder. One for murder, the other had run over a Serb with a bicycle and they sentenced her with three years. But she had almost lost her mind, or maybe she presented herself like that, I don’t know. And I tried to support her and to...no one came to her for visits, but the package I always distributed six ways. Hata...I forgot the other one’s name, that ran over the child of that Serb who was sentenced to three years, yes there was also that Zoja, Vera, Iliriana, that other sick one from Mitrovica, Kumrije Vocaj, and I. I asked my lawyer for leggings for winter for everyone, I dressed all of them because none of them had any from their own families.

At some point in the summer, it arrived late from Switzerland, my mother sent the package, except I could never eat the package myself, I always shared my food. Because I didn’t eat the food of the Serbs anymore in Pozharevc, the pork disgusted me to the point of vomiting because of the hair on the meat like that, like wire and my organism is very sensitive, it made me nauseous. But I had money at my disposal, my family sent me and I took...they sent milk, powdered fresh milk packets. I took the pot from *Nëna Tereze*, Selim Leku who always gave things to my father to send them to me there.

And now, I took the powdered milk, I boiled it and I had money, I bought cigarettes. I didn’t smoke, but the Serbs smoke, they all smoked there. Now, once a week they served us hot peppers in the kitchen, and once a week they served us cucumbers. Now I, with two cigarettes, I took a cucumber from a Serb with two cigarettes. And I gathered the cucumbers, I took them, cut them and pickled them. Excellent pickles from cucumbers. I made yogurt with bread yeasts. I stoke the core of the bread from the kitchen, because they always searched us from the kitchen when they went to the pavilion. But I put [the bread] in this part here {touches arm} of the shirt and now when I lifted my hands up like this {lifts up arms horizontally} the bread core went up, she searched over here {touches elbows}.

I took the milk, I boiled it exactly the way yogurt is made and I took cans from Lipjan. And the guard said to me, “What are you taking these with you for?” I said, “Who knows where they will take us. Do we have what to wash with? We don’t. I’ll need them, who knows for what.” The cans with marmalade and with this food that my father brought me from home, when I had my visits in Lipjan, were left, I took them with me. And the *shkina* told me,

“Leave them, leave them!” But I didn’t leave them. I said, “Who knows for what I’ll need them.” And I needed them for pickling and for food.

And as I was saying, I made... I made yogurt, as soon as I boiled the powdered milk, until it cooled a bit, until I put my finger in...perfect...*trrak*, [I put in] the bread core, I closed it. When I woke up in the morning the yogurt, the core didn’t shake. Yogurt would turn into bread. And now, like that, with hot pepper I made *lang*⁵⁸ and then I left those containers out. Outside there were pine trees, on the second floor of the prison, and it had this net here that they didn’t bring down. And I left them there, and I hid them from the guard, because if they found them in the room...you would get treated differently. And here, when I went to the kitchen, I’d put two-three hot peppers in a *halvah*⁵⁹ pan that my father sent with *tanhavëll*,⁶⁰ the dry kind, a bit of *lang*, a pickle, and *trrak*, under my armpit and I ate bread with that.

I ensured my food the entire time like this in Pozharevc. Or there was an incident, that meat...the salami as they called it, the pork as the Serbs called, I didn’t throw it away...they asked me for it, but I wouldn’t give it to them without something. Because sometimes they served us eggs for breakfast or a pastry. I said, “Bring me a pastry, take the pork.” For pork, they would lose their minds. And I exchanged my food, I would either have visits from home, now, with things that were bought, I would take it from them without a problem because they were safe. I would exchange [food], and in this way I ensured the food there. And the bread, they didn’t bake the bread especially for us because they had 150 of their women in prison. I had never seen, for the first time, I even said to them, when they said you’re going to stay these many years, I said, “But I would come and volunteer to see you 150 women for one month straight, because I’ve never heard in Kosovo that women go to prison like this” (laughs). Young women, mother-in-laws, girls, all for different crimes.

I want to mention another incident, when one of the Serb women there in prison brought in something and through the women they find out. There the information is passed on and they hear through visits that one of the women brought in...they mentioned it there, I don’t want to mention it in front of the camera, a kind of tool there in prison, the women. And now they searched the whole prison. When they start searching the whole prison, when the guard came to my room, I had ripped a photo of Hashim Thaçi from Serbian newspapers [and put] inside my pillowcase. And I was curious to read it, but outside I didn’t dare. I didn’t dare in the corridor, come on, when would I find a chance to read it, I’ll read it in my cell or when I’m alone, or something.

And there then...when they found the photo they took it. I mean, after the complete search of the beds, all the women and my bed, they took that photo. When they finished the whole search, they called me down to the office, and they took me straight to the basement. They made me get undressed, there I was very afraid, I thought they might bring someone to rape me. It turned out, when they acted that way, they took me to the basement and they told me...there were some tools on the prisoners’ side from the earlier time in the prison,

⁵⁸ A dairy product, tastes very much like cheese, but is more liquid.

⁵⁹ Kind of flour dessert - whether corn, wheat or semolina.

⁶⁰ Type of *halva* popular in middle eastern or central Asian countries.

the time when they abused them in...and she said to me, “Here all the Albanians we put through these things, we tortured, we tortured with these tools. This will do this to you, this, this, this, this.” They explained them to me and she said, “and we’re going to do this to you as well.” I wasn’t afraid of being abused, physically, I had another fear. There I was afraid I thought that might bring someone.

And there, they threatened me, they beat me and they persistently tried to make me trample on Hashim Thaçi’s photo, and I didn’t trample on it. Can you believe it, four-five people, pull here, pull there, trying to make me trample on it. I said, “I won’t trample on it, it’s a symbol of the Kosovo Liberation Army, and I won’t trample on it.”

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Do you regret not trampling on it?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: No, and even if I were in prison today, I wouldn’t trample on it because whatever one does, including the activism one ruins, one ruins it with their own deeds. If one redeems it, it is redeemed with one’s deeds (laughs), and so on...

I want to mention another incident, when I was so very sick for around seven days straight, that I got swollen. And I had great pain, my left ear and eye were tearing, the tears went down to here {touches chin}. And I felt such great pain, that you can’t imagine. And my body got swollen from the pain. I got all swollen, and I remained lying down. And they came, day and night the Serbs came, “Is she alive, or not?” looking at me, and they didn’t take me to the doctor.

Finally at the end...the problem that I mentioned, the sickness I had, went beyond that seven-day- sickness, an allergy emerged and my whole body itched, and I bled from scratching. There the Serbs reacted. The pressure they made to take me to the doctor, the Serbs, all the women of the pavilion went. “We can’t see her in this state. We can’t eat because of her, or anything.” Because I became with my face and everything, *zhugë*.⁶¹ My allergy emerged. There, when that [thing] like *zhugë* emerged like an allergy, a very old Serb, almost 90 years old, she was a Serb, she avoided the *shkina* and said to me, “You’re saved, and don’t worry, you’ve won Kosovo. You’re saved from the sickness, because this is an allergy. If it had erupted inside, it would have killed you on the spot. So, because you’re swollen, and have external *zhugë*, don’t worry at all. Even if they don’t take you to the doctor, don’t worry at all.” She said, “I worked, I was in power in Belgrade for a long time and look where I’ve ended up. This is what they’re like, this is what this state is like. And you be proud, Kosovo is yours, you won it, and for your pride, for your endurance, because you’ve endured perfectly. And there you have a beautiful president, a good one, you chose Hashim Thaçi” (laughs). Yes, because they commented when elections were held here, a Serb even said, she said, “If Rugova is elected, it’s better for us. If Hashim Thaçi is elected, it’s not good for us.” They commented on those elections.

⁶¹ *Zgjebe*, scabies.

And that old Serb woman told me, she said, “You in Albania had Enver Hoxha, handsome, and in Kosovo your Thaçi is handsome. All the presidents you elect are beautiful” (laughs). And when she told me about the sickness, I knew she was in the know through them and that she gave me this information. Now they took me to the doctor, after the intervention of the Serbs and they made pressure that they couldn’t see me in this state and they gave me injections, they sent me to Pozharevc and they took out my last two teeth. And that always annoyed me, because neither of the teeth were rotten. They gave no sign at all that they had to be taken out, they said, “Otherwise your body won’t stop swelling and it’s because of your teeth.” They took out my healthy teeth. In order to make the best out of the situation in which I was, I didn’t even know how or what was happening to me, and so I agreed, and they took out my teeth.

[Excerpt cut – editorial decision]

She said, “I’m a doctor, I’ve given the Hippocratic oath, I won’t damage you. On the contrary I’m quite curious to see, but I have to do the check-up because I’ve been ordered by the director of the prison.” And she checked all of me.

[Excerpt cut – editorial decision]

Now, Flora, anytime that...they returned them from prison from where they were in custody. They put me in a pavilion with Serbs. And when they returned them to prison, we communicated illegally sometimes with Flora in prison. I will never forget an incident, I risked it, I paid a gypsy woman and I sent her coffee through a window. The gypsy risked it because I paid her, I bought two bags of coffee for her and I don’t know...I made her a basket, because I made a basket from the willows of the prison that were released there. And with those basket, I sold them and ensured my food. So, now I sent Flora the coffee, I said, “I would really like some coffee right now.” I said, “Come because I want to try a gypsy staying here, I’ll say, ‘I’ll buy you something,’ maybe she’ll risk it.” She risked it, she approached the window, she had the window open and took it, and she drank it. And maybe no one never knew, because none of the guards found out.

And when Flora told me, in the morning when we communicated, I was following the case, when the Serbs were making coffee, I never approached them because I thought they’d find an opportunity to abuse me. Because they could hardly wait for a reason. Imagine when they came, to find me with a newspaper in hand, they would come and quickly grab it from me. And now, just a reason for me to fight with them, and then for all of them to get [together] and to beat me. However I...and I retreated in order not to be seen as the mean one, but also not to have reasons to fight with them.

[Excerpt cut – editorial decision]

And so, the time came, all the Albanian women were released.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: How were you released?

Zahrije Podrimqaku: One by one, doctor Flora was released, they released some from Shtime, doctor Flora was released. I treated every woman who was released from prison, first Hata, then I treated these ordinary [prisoners], either with coffee, or with juice, because I said one less Albanian in prison, one less Albanian in prison. And so, I was the last one to be released of all the Albanian women. And the moment when...one day, before being released, they sent me to the fields to plant onions, it was March. And on March 15, they sent us to the fields. We went to the fields to plant onions and now, they left me onion seeds to plant there. I stayed in one place and when they finished what they were doing, the guardians accompanying me brought the prisoners.

And a prisoner came and said, "Why aren't you planting? You're not working. Stop, I'll teach you." And there I got irritated, and I was the only Albanian, and I said, "Will you get away?" I grabbed an earthenware vase in my hand, I said, "Get away from me within minutes, no, no," I said to her in Serbian, "or I'll split your head in two with this vase." And she doesn't get away, talking to me, "I'm teaching you." I said, "Get away from me, criminal!" I yelled loudly there. I said, "You are a criminal, you are all a criminal country, because I won't plant and I don't want to plant. I just want to stay in clean air."

In the midst of that, all the guards gathered. "Come here," I [said to] the guard, they saw that the work...I didn't release the vase. A director came there to intervene, he was the director of the prison, the Lipjan prison, but he spoke Albanian. And he came and spoke to me in Albanian. And all the guards knew Albanian, they never accepted to speak Albanian, never, never, never, not at all under any circumstances. And they all understood, because they all were born and raised here, in Lipjan. And then this personel came there to Pozharevc. And he said to them, "Leave her, don't talk to her because she's upset and none of you come close to her." There they gathered all the women, they got them and me on the bus, and interrupted the work because of the problem that I caused in the fields and they sent us to the pavilion. When we went to the pavilion I thought, "Ha, now!" I was waiting for the punishment at any moment. I thought they're going to send me to isolation, they're going to tie me up, to tie me up, or they're going to physically abuse me. I just expected these two [outcomes], something was going to happen.

Wait, wait, wait...dinner came, we went to the kitchen. Usually in the kitchen they read names to send prisoners to the fields. And then they read the names, they didn't read my name at all. I thought, if tonight they don't take measures against me for the incident that happened in the fields, they will probably do it tomorrow. And now we finished with the kitchen, we went to sleep. And in the night, I saw a dream during the night, somehow because the place where I was born, the place has many fruit trees, we had five hundred fruit trees there, because we're a hard-working family and we worked in farming a lot as a family. There's not fruit tree that isn't on those lands, but we also have water. So I can say Drenica, because a better place than the place I was born isn't anywhere. There's a lot of water, and there are many trees and all goodness is there, there's a great freshness. And now, I saw the meadow in green – the dream, the apples all shaken, in red bunches, but in those apples [with] me looking at them and wandering through that meadow, and in that moment the director and the supervisor of the prison somehow came. And I approached them and filled two bags with apples and I gave them to them and they gave me sour looks and didn't take the apples.

Now, when I woke up in the morning, I had a...because after that problem happened to me, that I caught that Serb choking me in my sleep that time, I categorically requested, because I didn't accept to sleep in that room and I requested that my room be changed. Now, I requested another room, they didn't put me where I requested, but it turned out better because they put me in a smaller room where I was the fifth person. And in that whole room, there was a Bulgarian from Bulgaria, from Sofia, there was a gypsy and there was a Serb from Kragujevac, there was a Hungarian and I, an Albanian. I mean, none of us where...we were all of from different nationalities. And I told this Lili, her name was Lili, I told her, I said, "Lili, stop a bit because I have to tell you something," and so on, and so on, "tonight I saw a dream." She said, "Zahrije, they called you to the fields last night, they called your name. You have the decision in the office that you're going home because the green...the red color of the apple, they are happiness. The green is...the people will be happy when you go home" (laughs). "And the apples they didn't take from you," she said, "they're spiteful that you didn't finish another year here and to finish the entire prison sentence, because they always held it under your nose that you're going to stay for four years. In fact they didn't imagine that you would stay for three."

And then America conditioned the finances of Serbia and released all the prisoners in groups. And my turn came too, even though I was the last of the women to leave, I was happy just because I didn't leave any of the women there. And now she said to me, "And the problem that happened with you in the fields, they always abused you, they always looked at you in a bad light. They wouldn't have let you [get away with] not being beaten, but you most probably have a decision to go home." And so, that day was a Friday, the date was 16, I was staying there, she made, in the hall with the television, that Bulgarian, made jumpers, and I was waiting there that they would call me to abuse me, or what would happen.

When she called me...when the courier, "Podrimqaku, come to the office to the police!" I went there, the guard told me, "You were very upset yesterday, you were sick, come for me to take you to the doctor." I had noticed that when they released doctor Flora, they sent her to the doctor. Afërdita, like that, I saw them in the yard being sent to the doctor. And each one they released, they sent them first to be given a check up, as if they were released, as if, "You were freed in a proper way and you're going home healthy." When they sent me to the doctor, then she said to me, "How are you? Will you take this pill?" I said, "No, I won't take it." A pill with a pink color like ibuprofen. She said, "It's for calm calm," and so on, "take it because you were upset." I said, "No, I'm not sick, I'm fine." And, "Ok," she said. "Why am I going home?" "No, why who told you?" the doctor, "Who told you?" I said, "The fat books that I see to be signed," I said, "[are] only for when someone goes home, because I don't know why someone should sign someone when they're sick to go to the doctor." "No, no" she said, "you're not thinking of going home. Sign here!" I signed.

There I understood, and I was very convinced that I was going to go home. And, the guard told me, "Where's your cell?" I said, "Room number three, second floor." "Come with me to your room." When I went there she said to me, "Sit there on the bed, open the trunk," we had some wooden trunks like from old times, our clothes, the things we had for cleaning and everything. "Whichever are your clothes, take them and leave these other things." I said, "Why?" She said, "Yes, yes you're going home." I said, "Oh yes? Ok." "Why," she said, "you're not

happy, you're not reacting at all?" I said, "What should I be happy for? Prisons filled with Albanians, only I am going home, what? Plenty of men here." "Ah..." she said, "but you're leaving the prison alone." I said, "It doesn't matter that I'm leaving alone." And she said, "Take the clothes." I took the clothes, "Go to the visitors' room, straight there! Do not tell a word to anyone, no one to know, do not signal to a single woman that you are going home because all the women will rise up in protests and strikes. They said, if she's released, we'll go on strike!" Their Serb women.

There I took my clothes, I put them on. I said goodbye to the Red Cross, the director of the prison came. She brought me a book like this, and she was this fat {shows her size}. She said, "Before you go, I want to ask you two questions?" I said, "Go ahead!" She said, "Do you want to get an automatic gun to kill Serbs as soon as you go to Kosovo?" I said, "Yes, but as far as I know the war is over." She said, "No, it isn't over." I said, "Fine, I'll see, based on the situation." I left her with these words. Now, "Depending on the situation, because as far as I know there is no problem anymore, the war is over."

[Excerpt cut – editorial decision]

From there, they said, "Around 46 males were released today" as if there wasn't room to send her as well, there's no room. They said, "Her, we'll send her tonight to Belgrade." They removed me from the prison on the 16th, they sent me to Belgrade to the office of the Red Cross and... I said, "Why me to Belgrade? Why don't you send me to Pristina the way you send all of the prisoners?" "No, tonight there's no [chance]. Have you ever been to Belgrade?" I said, "No, I haven't been." They said, "You haven't seen Belgrade, we'll take you to see Belgrade." And they sent me to a building of the Red Cross, an Albanian woman came there, she spoke to me in Albanian, she said, "I'm from Suhareka, I live here with my family." I said, "Good, are you doing to stay here tonight with me?" She said, "Yes." And they left me alone, and I went out to the city. They left me alone that night for a while. And the whole night I was alone, without sleeping for a minute. That night was like my entire [time in] prison.

The doors banged, *bam-boom, bam-boom, bam-boom, bam-boom*, I didn't dare fall asleep, or anything. I saw a phone in that office and I picked up the phone. And I called my family here straight away. And I called and spoke to my family, I said, "I've been released from prison, but I'm in Belgrade, I won't come tonight. Don't wait for me tonight." They said, "That's the news we heard that you're free and we're waiting." I said, "No, don't wait tonight, [I won't leave] until tomorrow because they took me to an apartment of the Red Cross. I'm in Belgrade tonight and tonight I'm alone in an office they put me in. No one is here, I'm alone." And I tried the phone, when, *trrak*, they cut off the phone. It might have been recorded, and it was interrupted.

And so, tired without sleeping, not even sleep, I didn't dare sleep because the doors slammed, I thought what if someone comes in, I'm here alone. And with stress all night, with fear. When I said, come on, I will just go the bathroom. Because from exhaustion I was covered in sweat, and my hair became oily and don't even ask about my face. I thought I'll go to the bathroom to clean up. I got in, I cleaned up in that bathroom quickly, with one hundred fears. And I exited, towels, I had the clothes there that I had in prison with myself and my hair dyed and

the water woke me up completely and refreshed me. And at eight...at eight no, but at seven, they came and took me and I left for here to Kosovo. Somewhere around twelve or one I made it to Merdare.

(Laughs) There an American soldier asked me questions because these [people] from our Red Cross came out, from the Red Cross of Serbia. They took all my clothes and there was this Sebastian and a Nadia, internationals yes, but they spoke Albanian, they spoke to me in Albanian (smiles). And they, when they took my clothes that soldier stopped me, he told him, he spoke to him in English, he said, “Can we talk?” And this Sebastian explained, he said, “He asks, how do you feel?” I said, “From here until the border, up until now for almost three years I’ve breathed a very dirty air, now I feel a freshness in my body, and even the cells of my body are invigorated. I feel a very good aroma, a very clean air of Kosovo (cries and laughs).” And in the Red Cross office, my family and relatives were there, my friends, uncles waiting for me, some citizens and then with them I came to Drenica.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: What did you do?

Zahire Podrimqaku: Well, then I was very strong (laughs). I greeted the members of my family, all of them, but I didn’t shed a single tear (laughs). Now, a bit, perhaps because of age, I can’t endure it, because I was very strong. Because [there was] also the incident when my mother was in prison visiting me on November 2, 2000 for the first time after two years...I forgot to mention that too, and I feel an obligation to...to mention it, and there I endured very strongly. Because day before, when the doctor was released, the Red Cross contacted me and notified me that we’re bringing your mother for a visit and I prepared psychologically. When I went there to the visitors’ room, my mother got a bit red and I said to her, “Mother, you know what I told you, I’ll run straight away to the pavilion and I won’t stay with you.” Then she got strong and we talked a bit.

The guard there, the mother of these ordinary girls whom they brought in for a visit, said to them, “Your girls will be freed.” And Afërdita was there. “And she,” she said, “will be freed, yes,” [she] addressed my mother, “this [daughter] of yours won’t be freed.” I said, “You mother, don’t worry at all because I’ll arrive in Kosovo before you” (laughs). So, I didn’t leave her a single word. And, for almost one month straight I had visits from people. They all received me well. All the schools with their staff came and visited me. All the institutions came with their staff, they visited me.

Professional Life

[Cut from the video-interview: the interviewer asks the speaker about her professional life.]

Zahrije Podrimqaku: When *bac* Adem⁶² came with the whole Council, visited me with all the members of the Council, he said to me, he said, “Zara, did the municipality come to see you?” I said, “Yes.” “Did they promise you a position, or something?” I said, “*Valla*, they didn’t say anything to me.” “Did they tell you, or they didn’t tell you, now, that you here are the head of the Council,” he said, “now, you finish the visit,” he said, “*Bac*, you lead the Council here and the Council gives you a salary. It’s not a big salary, but enough to be active and deal with the Council again.”

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Is this the work that you still do today?

Zahrie Podrimqaku: No, I worked in the Council until December 2002, in December 2002 an opening was announced for gender equality officers in all Kosovo municipalities, and there it happened to me, I mean, when I took the newspaper to read it that day, that the municipality announced an opening for gender equality, it said there that the [applicant] needed to have worked in humanitarian organizations and needed to know the terrain, to be communicative, to be forthcoming in communicating with citizens as well and each time I fell in love with it, because the job that I had done before the war suited me. And simply put, I took the newspaper and folded it, and hid it in my pant suit. I went and directly addressed the executive director, he wasn’t there. I went to his adviser Gëzim Sheshani and I said to him, I said, “Gëzim, is it possible, can I compete in this call for application that was announced? It said there [that applicants needed] high school, but higher education is welcome.” “However,” I said, “they say the director Avdyl Krasniqi, is strict in respecting the law.” Avdyl was the executive director, the brother of professor Jakup Krasniqi who was the President of the Parliament.

And he said, “What if someone with a university degree apply?” I was registered in the faculty, but also [was engaged in] activity, I was engaged in activities and everything, and remained halfway done and the conditions, because of the way the situation was, my parent told me simply, “I don’t have the financial means and with the way the situation is, just deal with the activity.” And Gëzim said to me, “Go, get the application.” I went and got it, he said, “and call Ibra,” Ibrahim Hajdari, my former colleague, whom I worked with before war and Gëzim as well. And he said, “We’ll fill out the applications.” They wrote, they signed my references when we went to give them to someone. And he said to Ibra, “Don’t take the applications down to the archives, but leave them in the office. Whoever comes to take the applications to apply, tell them to take them, but know that Zahrije applied. All the citizens know Zahrije and I don’t believe there will be a problem.” And in fact it was like that, I have great respect for a certain Zejnepe Gllareva from Verbovc, she had finished university. She comes to get the application and when Ibra told her this, she decides not to apply, she says, “No, when I was getting educated, Zahrije was working for us, she financed nine hundred educational workers and contributed a lot.” I can’t compete with her and we were three competitors, the three of us had high school diplomas at that time.

And I was employed. Edit Harxhi was on the commission, this woman from Albania. At the time she worked with internationals, with this person from UNMIK, who was the Minister for Integration. She was also an Ambassador,

⁶² Adem Demaçi (1936-) is 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. He is usually referred to as *bac*, uncle, in sign of respect.

now she's in Albania. And she was working there. She was directly on the commission, a foreigner, and someone from the municipality of Drenas, when they questioned me. And I went, but when I got in the other two competitors had gone before me. And she asked me for the description of the work responsibilities, like a poem. She said to me, "Do you know what kind of work is this?" I explained everything I worked on, because I saw it in the call for applications. And I prepared, and then she asked me, "Where did you work?" I told her, "In the Council for the Protection of Rights, in the Municipal Committee for Financing. I was also the head for migrants in the branch of Çikatova e Re, and the head of the sub-branch and I was in prison, that's all." "More," she said, "go," there was a restaurant there, "I will come to buy you a coffee, because no one answered, not only in your municipality, but in all of Kosovo, all the gender equality officers I interviewed, none of them answered like you." She said, "I'm very satisfied, I'm surprised." And Ibra said to her, "No, it is a violation of the law to say you're hired right away." "More," she said, "right now I won't ask about the law at all, I'm giving the announcement right now." She said, "Just let her go, I'll buy her a coffee."

And I started as an Officer for Gender Equality. But I supported, when there was a choice between women and men with the same education, I always supported the women. I lobbied for as many women principals as possible in schools and directors in municipal departments, in directorates. However, I don't know what to say, with regards to women in these political parties, women who are capable and brave, they don't keep them in political parties, but they keep these women who are subjugated and they place one or two of them.

Dreams

[Cut from the video-interview: the interviewer asks the speaker about the dreams she had when she was young, and to what extent she fulfilled them.]

Zahrije Podrimqaku: Based on the history which I have of the grandfather on my mother's side, he was a captain with a military rank, and a political prisoner in Vushtrri. He was always for Kosovo to be not only the Republic that it is today, but to be united with Albania. And I loved Albania a lot, and that is also why my husband today is an Albanian from Albania (laughs). And these were my dreams, for Kosovo to be united with Albania. It's fine, work has been done, and today there is free speech, one speaks freely, you don't have the Serbs with all those abuses, psychological abuse and so on. It's our leaderships, good work has been done, but not how we imagined Kosovo.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Thank you very much.

Zahrije Podrimqaku: And so, I have a message in the end, mostly for women, that on the road they take, regardless of different obstacles, independently of different obstacles, for them to be persistent whether they have obstacles, or successes, not to leave their dreams, for them to make it, because only this way can they reach their goals. And the other message is to support each other, to be more connected, because when they're connected amongst themselves, all women are more powerful and can reach any goal.

