

INTERVIEW WITH ISMAIL GASHI SLLOVIA

Lipjan | September 20, 2016

Duration: 65 minutes

Present:

1. Ismail Gashi Sllovia (Speaker)
2. Erëmirë Krasniqi (Interviewer)
3. Noar Sahiti (Camera)

Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:

() – emotional communication

{ } – the speaker explains something using gestures.

Other transcription conventions:

[] – addition to the text to facilitate comprehension

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

Part One

Ismail Gashi: I am Ismail Gashi, born on June 14, 1945 in the village of Sllovia in Lipjan.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Could you tell us about your early childhood memories, the *rreth*,¹ the family you were raised in, where did you go to school?

Ismail Gashi: Yes, it's an after war childhood, the establishing of communism, and a poor childhood. The Albanian nation was poor in general and it didn't get any better, it only got worse, that poverty in various communist forms, especially to the Albanian nation. I went...I finished elementary school in my birthplace, four grades, five...and [from] the fifth until the eighth grade in the village of Gadime, because it was the only Albanian eight-years school at that time. There was no other eight years school, in the, let's say, East part of the village of Sitnica of this municipality. After the eight-year school, I continued my education with the difficulties of a child from the village. I registered at the gymnasium² in Pristina, back then we carried the food for one year with ourselves. We stayed in rooms not...I mean in the cheapest and not the best ones. I finished there...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was life in the village? Could you describe it?

Ismail Gashi: Life...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Let's not rush to the high school, could you tell us about life in the village at that time?

Ismail Gashi: Life, life in the village...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was it?

Ismail Gashi: It was a village life, I mean it was a life where we didn't have the nowadays standards. There were no such standards, there was no electricity, of course there was no electricity, it came very late and the economic situation was pretty much under the pressure of the state. I don't remember everything, but they talk about the surplus, that everything was taken, the grain, dairy, cattle, meat. And Albanians usually had to give the surplus of what was harvested from the fields, let's say, the wheat. And I

¹ *Rreth* (circle) is the social circle, it includes not only the family but also the people with whom an individual is in contact. The opinion of the *rreth* is crucial in defining one's reputation.

² A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

mean, Albanians were always a little suppressed, somehow in a special way, in the Stalinian type of collectivization³ until '49, the collectives were destroyed later but there was still poverty.

I want to say that overall, there was a poverty scale among the whole Albanian nation, how to say, because they were all mostly engaged in agriculture. Kosovo didn't have an industry where people could be employed, the education was... most of the villagers only had finished four grades of elementary school. What justified Tito's⁴ policies abroad was that Albanians have Albanian schools as well, but many villages didn't have the eight-years school, it was very rare. It was a cut off which we could, we could not go to high school without finishing the elementary one. I finished elementary school and went to the gymnasium, but I was forced to only finish two grades of it in order to take the scholarship and then I had to transfer to the *Shkolla Normale*⁵ because of the financial situation, I finished the *Shkolla Normale* in Ferizaj.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What about the family, could you tell us something about your family?

Ismail Gashi: To be honest I didn't want to go there at all, because I grew up as an orphan. My mother died when I was two or three years old, I don't exactly remember, or I am a little (smiles), no, I don't remember, some episodes, few episodes, I only remember some sequences of my mother, I mean, I grew up without her.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Who took care of you?

Ismail Gashi: Ah?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Who took care of you?

Ismail Gashi: My grandmother, the mother of my father, later my paternal uncle's wife who was also my maternal aunt, whom later I valued as if she was my mother.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you live in a ... family community?

Ismail Gashi: We lived in a family communion together with two of my paternal uncles, we were around 23-24 members of the family. The children back then had, they were not allowed to go to the *oda*⁶ where men stayed, but we stayed in the "house of fire"⁷ together with the women. If there was, this is how it seems to me, children's rights were violated back then, unintentionally...but even when they cooked some good meal, they rarely gave it to the children, because the *oda* was the first to take the good meat, the first *sofra*,⁸ then the other was left to the women, and the children took what was left from both of

³ Collectivization of agricultural land established in 1948 by the Communist regime in Yugoslavia, and ended in 1955.

⁴ Josip Broz Tito (1892-1980) born Josip Broz, was a Yugoslav revolutionary and statesman, serving in various roles from 1943 until his death in 1980.

⁵ The *Shkolla Normale* opened in Gjakova in 1948 to train the teachers needed for the newly opened schools. With the exception of a brief interlude during the Italian Fascist occupation of Kosovo during WWII, these were the first schools in Albanian language that Kosovo ever had. In 1953, the *Shkolla Normale* moved to Pristina.

⁶ Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.

⁷ The house/room where the cooking was done from women.

⁸ Low round table for people to gather at communal dinners, sitting on the floor.

them (smiles). We didn't have a healthy enough childhood, besides the fact that we ate bio food, but also...

And as for the education I am saying it was...I finished the *Shkolla Normale* and returned to my birthplace. At that time we already had our own houses with my brothers, because I have two brothers, we had our own houses. I worked as a teacher in Sllovia, in my birthplace, for one year. In the academic year '66-'67 I registered in the [Faculty of] Albanian Language and Literature in Pristina after...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was the reason that they tailed you during high school?

Ismail Gashi: The case was... there were also [police] tailing us in high school, because I only remember them later because Ferizaj was a little bigger and I didn't realize it while I was in the gymnasium in Pristina. I was too young to understand the political factions, but in Ferizaj yes, because people came to allegedly give us lectures in pedagogy and psychology I, some Serbs, they came from Belgrade. In most cases they didn't talk about such topics, they introduced themselves as pedagogists and psychologists, but talked about political topics. They usually said bad things about Albania. That they were with China, the Chinese go there by airplane and eat lunch in Tirana and so on, we once faced a problem because it doesn't make sense for the Chinese to come to Tirana by airplane (smiles,) because they spend more than the lunches they eat there. And they usually took those questions of mine as tendentious.

Then they stopped me after the lecture to ask, "Who are you? Why did you ask that question? Did anybody tell you to ask that question?" I explained that it was actually an instinct, that nobody forced me to ask those questions to those quote and unquote professors, {makes air quotes}...because they weren't professors as you can see, they were people of the state security who wanted to know who are these teachers who tomorrow will be teaching Albanian students, what, what could they do, they wanted to know us before we entered the classrooms. But we didn't have big troubles in the *Shkolla Normale*.

This aspect of the *Shkolla Normale* was something that was suffered, that was experienced mostly by the directors or the professors, especially the director against the ruling power. We directly didn't have many troubles, except one case when Abdyl Rama, I was close friends with him, we asked, we went to the train [station] to pick up *Rilindja*,⁹ the train came before eight. And as we were waiting, a Serbian policeman whom Abdyl knew, he knew that his name was Uroš and he worked in a village in Suhareka... at Abdyl's birthplace, he was from the village of Reqan of Suhareka. And he asked us, "What are you waiting for?" "To pick up *Rilindja*." "The other newspapers are here, why don't you take them?" "No, but we...are waiting for *Rilindja*." This happened before the Plenum, before [Aleksandar] Ranković,¹⁰ "Phaj, we are here for *Rilindja*, because as for the Serbian ones, there is nothing we can read in Serbian." We wouldn't... We would never really take it and we told him, he said, "Ok, since you don't want to take it, come with me, come..." (smiles) he sent us to the police station and slapped us four or five times and told us to go back to the classroom.

⁹ *Rilindja*, the first newspaper in Albanian language in Yugoslavia, initially printed in 1945 as a weekly newspaper.

¹⁰ Aleksandar Ranković (1909-1983), was a Yugoslav communist of Serb origin, considered to be the third most powerful man in Yugoslavia after Josip Broz Tito and Edvard Kardelj.

But there was no other special case, but also the case when Adem Demaçi¹¹ was imprisoned, yes, '64, we were seniors. A friend of... Gani Gashi came from Mitrovica. Zeqir Gërvalla was imprisoned, his classmate, and he told us that Adem Demaçi had been imprisoned again. We had heard about *bac*¹² Adem, we had heard of him but we didn't quite know, because one barely knew at the time, even those who knew didn't speak. Now we learned from our friend Gani, that he was imprisoned because he distributed [the Albanian] flags, because he did this and that and how to say, the chills of the National issue started showing on us in the last year of *Shkolla Normale*, maybe the age...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So, all of these started affecting...

Ismail Gashi: These affected us the whole life, of course...

Erëmirë Krasniqi:...The political transformation...

Ismail Gashi:... now... they affected us the whole life, those chills, I am calling them like this because they tickle you a little, and then with my studies we are now in '68. No matter the wonders that were promised after Ranković's fall, in my opinion, I talked with my friends in prison at the time, as well as in private, there was [not], the system didn't really change. See, the state security were those verified fathers, the people who sent them to work there, not to mention them by names because it doesn't make sense. Or it was the spy, the collaborator of Ranković's UDB,¹³ who now became an UDB-*ash*¹⁴ himself, among them there were those Albanians who collaborated, I don't want to mention them by names because we cannot say them all now, and....Nothing really changed, because the situation, the propaganda that now we have the Constitution, it only held the name of a Republic, because it's almost a republic and it was proved by the Kamenica group who were imprisoned in '75, 35 activists for the National cause. They were not sentenced very lightly, even *bac* Adem was sentenced with 15 years, they didn't get out of it easily, those boys whose heads the ruling power, you know, kept under [their control] to see who was trying to move forward the cause, because the state's deceit didn't last long, it happened in '68, I think '81 was an extension of '68, the demands of '68 which our government allegedly fulfilled, they even say, "We have fulfilled them," the gover... the Albanian politicians, but the University, the Constitution, Language Equality, our Flag were students' demands, it was not the merit of the leaders.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In '68?

Ismail Gashi: In '68 the students made it possible and I even hear it in the interviews... Azem Vllasi¹⁵ and some others, we made it happen, we brought the Constitution, they didn't do it, because I remember it

¹¹ 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.

¹² *Bac*, literally uncle, is an endearing and respectful term for an older person.

¹³ UDB, *Uprava državne bezbednosti* (State Security Administration).

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

¹⁵ Azem Vllasi (1948-). In 1974 he was chairman of the Socialist Youth of Yugoslavia, and member of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. In 1986 he became the Party leader in Kosovo and president of Kosovo until Milošević fired him and briefly detained him. Currently Vllasi is a lawyer, author and political adviser/consultant. He is a member of the Democratic Party of Kosovo [PDK].

once when Ismail Bajra¹⁶ came to the faculty, and we had, the events in Belgrade happened before ours, and we asked a question at the entrance of the [Faculty of] Philosophy, “How can you enter the building of Kosovo Government when the Yugoslav and Serbian flags are hanging there as well as the one of the party that was back then, and there is no National Flag hanging?” He said, “It is not easy for me either.” “But then why haven’t you opened the discussion about this topic?” Since ‘48, when it stopped, until ‘69, in 20 years no leader of ours had openly told these people, in any forum or media or state level, that they cannot ban your National Flag. But when in ‘68 we demanded the republic, they offered these trappings, of course they gave them but they also kept them in their hands because they kept also the people in their hands.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did they tail you after ‘68?

Ismail Gashi: Of course they tailed me after ‘68, the [state] security tailed everybody, because we don’t know who is being tailed without going to the [state] security. In the security, you only realize that they have tailed everyone when you go there, even those who the people and they themselves thought were on their side. When they ask you even about a person, a municipality leader, for example, I was asked about Fehmi Jupiqi, he was part of the ruling power, former municipality leader, but he was a little more special than the others, it is already known that they asked about people who were important in the party, how to say, they had their certified group of people... their group, but they also investigated people within the nation, I mean, in our *rreth*, that neither I nor my friends thought that the state security would tail us. We, we, it is already known that when we went out, when we were set free from prison, it happened with the decision of...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did they imprison you in ‘68?

Ismail Gashi: In ‘68 no, but when I went to the military service the decision was sent there from here, that I allegedly had been too vocal in the school of the village and they sent me back to military service. There they sent me to the Military Court of Zagreb because I was doing my service in Rijeka. It was how they called it back then, the fifth military zone, Zagreb was their center, they sentenced me with 60 days there, but they didn’t, they didn’t sentence me much compared to what was written about it here...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was it a defamation that you propagandized in school settings, or what?

Ismail Gashi: That was it, that was it... in the court they also charged a lawyer for me, a Montenegrin mayor. Here in the municipality they had written four pages, almost four pages and a half, some more lines, in fact there were two lines that were connected to it, that when I allegedly entered the school with the uniform, I attacked the local government officials, in fact I had never entered the school with a military uniform (smiles)...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What kind of uniform?

Ismail Gashi: I came for an exam, in order to make the military service only one year, I didn’t come to school with a uniform, neither did I go to take the exam with a military uniform, because it’s not that we

¹⁶ was highly ranked in the provincial committee of the League of Communists of Kosovo, and state administration.

liked that uniform that much. But after 45 days there, around 15, the director of the jail in Opatija of Slovenia there, Slovenia...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Of Croatia...

Ismail Gashi: Opatija is a known place, the military jail was somewhere near Lug Mountain. They removed 15 days, I was only held for 45 days. I came here and they didn't employ me, when I returned here. They didn't allow me to work in the municipality territory, not that they wrote a decision which didn't allow me, but they just didn't allow me to work. Wherever I applied I had to wait around 3 months with the school director, and back then the Education Director was called the Education BVI [*Bashkësia Vetëqevërisëse e Interesit* [Self Governing Interest Community]]. At some point, no matter his own wish, he said, "Do, do something, leave." Eh, I went to Gjilan, on March 1, 1970, I was accepted in the gymnasium. I had not graduated yet, but I taught there until...I graduated during my time as a teacher in the gymnasium of Gjilan, yes I worked until '74.

In the school year '74-'75, in September 1, I came to Lipjan with a little trouble, not without troubles at all. Because they were leaders now, some of them were my ex-teachers who, to be honest, had a good opinion of me since I was a pretty good student, according to what they say and what they used to say back then. But, the teachers also liked my rebellion, because there were not so many of us who rebelled. So, I never had friends of my age since then, because people of my age weren't with me back then. Yes, I worked until November 23, 1979, I was arrested because of those movements. Tito who was [here] in October, we did some acts of revolt because of his visit, we did that within the *Lëvizja Nacional-Çlirimtare e Kosovës dhe e Viseve tjera Shqiptare në Jugosllavi* [National-Liberation Movement of Kosovo and other Albanian Regions in Yugoslavia] and we...that was the time when I was imprisoned together with tens of others, I even have info...words, not precise notes, they said that there were even 400 [people arrested]. 26 [people] were taken in Lipjan, 26 of them, ex-students, there were even actual students who were taken, teachers and other youth, intellectuals, that's how I am referring to those who were studying and were good students. After prison...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How long did they keep you? How long did they keep you in prison?

Ismail Gashi: I stayed five months, investigations, after we were indicted for acc...for three months, after we were indicted for violations of the penal code, they classified us as violators of the penal code. They set us free with the motivation that Kosovo Leadership is better with you (smiles), and it's forgiving it to most of you. We were set free on April 24, 1980, one part, Ibish Qerleci and I were under the same decision. Under the same decision, and the others from various regions were set free as well, because there were people imprisoned not only from Lipjan, [but] from all around Kosovo, the Movement was not only Kamenica's nor Lipjan's, but it was extended all around Kosovo, and I didn't work.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did you do after prison? I mean, after you were released?

Ismail Gashi: I stayed at home, I had very bad [financial] conditions. My wife was fired from work, she spoke Russian, she used to work with me in the high school. They fired her in September just because she was my wife. We both were unemployed for two years, my wife made it somehow, to be honest, she started tailoring with some papers, with some models, she started tailoring with a sewing machine in

order to provide food to the kids, we had two daughters, the third one was born just then, I also had a son later, Shkumbin, but my big daughter has finished her Master's degree in Literature, now she lives, she is married, lives, and works in Ferizaj. Vlora, the second daughter, lives and works in Germany. Arjeta works here, but is married in Tirana, she works in the Ministry of Public Administration, while my son is a computer engineer, he works in the Ministry of Education, he maintains the computers' network, but we are getting into private matters...

I didn't work until '85, in '85 I started working in the Crafting Cooperative, that's how we called them, some cooperatives were established back then that collected employees in order to build a small building, to instal the electricity, to paint and build canals. The craftsmen had some groups of employees, they made their union in a single Crafting Cooperative. I worked there as an administrator, I maintained the administrative papers, I worked there until '95. I was engaged there since the first day in the '90s when the democratic processes were established here...I mean since the first elections, with the beginning of the Democratic League,¹⁷ I continually was a member of the leadership, I led the information on the branch's commission until '99. I was elected a deputy in both, presidential and parliamentary elections of '92 and '98 in Kosovo, I was a deputy without money back then (smiles), and I've been leading the Education [System in the municipality] since '95.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was your activism during the '80s, could you tell us about this phase?

Ismail Gashi: In the '80s, the demonstrations of '81, in fact the patriotic actions didn't stop. In '89 also, the establishment of the [political] parties, the Democratic League, the Human Rights Council some days before, I worked there pretty much as well, also other [political] parties after the Democratic League were a continuation of the demonstrations of '81. Because a path was paved that...the establishment of the parties to me was a, a great good, because we were no longer illegal, we worked publically and got detached from illegality, we worked publicly in the Democratic League. Just like, you know, that phase was a phase of the very aggressive violence of [Slobodan] Milošević,¹⁸ because they were closed...we were dismissed from our workplaces, school objects were closed, they made proc... also big material pressures, people were in poverty, then we were more [connected] to the diaspora, and with agriculture problems, our own products.

I know that the education was possible only thanks to the 70% of the fundings coming from abroad, I mean the Central Financial Council which collected the money that came from abroad, we only managed to collect the 30% to provide the small salaries of the teachers, from the locals, from the people, because we were poor and there was no one you could ask for money, nobody was employed. These that were established, *Pajtimi*¹⁹ in the '90s, the Educational System and the KLA²⁰ are the last decade's phenomena that brought us to this point, to independence.

¹⁷ *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* - Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK). 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.

¹⁸ Milošević's ascension to power began in 1987, when at the Communist League of Yugoslavia's Plenum he embraced the cause of Kosovo Serbian nationalist and immediately afterwards became President of Serbia.

¹⁹ In 1991 a mass movement for the forgiveness of blood feuds (*pajtimi i gjakut*), was launched among the Albanian population of Kosovo. It was initiated by a group of students, former political prisoners, who approached folklore scholar Anton Çetta and others seniors figures in academia to lead the process. The movement reconciled thousands of cases, and it became a movement for national unity.

²⁰ Kosovo Liberation Army.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you get involved in the Reconciliations Movement?

Ismail Gashi: We got involved in the Reconciliations Movement, we had no choice but to involve, it was the thing we had to do, it wasn't imposed on us, but professor Anton's²¹ [Çetta] call was to gather people who were accepted by the *rreth*, be they students, workers, teachers, *hoxha*,²² priests, only if the *rreth* accepted them. We thought of those that were more distinguished in our *rreth* up until that moment, and the *rreth* accepted us well, when Reconciliations started, they accepted us well. Now, the moment, on February 2 [1990], before the reconciliations started, we made a reconciliation that day, on February 2 we made a reconciliation at Xhevdet Breznica's²³ grave, who was killed on February 2, 1990, in the demonstrations of Magura. In order to make that funeral greater, the funerals were massive, we had around 10.000 people at the funeral and we made that funeral even greater so that the two families reco...who reached the reconciliation days before, extended the reconciliation hand at Xhevdet Breznica's grave. And that was also accepted by the crowd participating in the funeral, it was accepted very well.

And when the reconciliations started officially, it seemed to us that it was going to get big, they started in Peja, the student youth started it as an action. [It was] The ideas of the former prisoners who were now free and of smart people and of national traditions. Because we had blood feuds reconciliations even before, Haxhi Zeka²⁴ had organized reconciliations and made reconciliations in local areas of smaller localities as well as wider ones. This was a more massive reconciliation action, it included the whole Kosovo and every level and every kind of reconciliations. I can undoubtedly say that we even made a political reconciliation, a political reconciliation because the enemies could not...they weren't afraid of spies, who was the leader, who sent me to jail, when Fadil Hoxha²⁵ and Hysen Tërpeza²⁶ reconciled, they hugged each other in a meeting in Pristina, that was the coronation of political reconciliation. It was not...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What kind of cases did you have in Lipjan?

Ismail Gashi: We had every kind of cases just like everywhere. We had property conflicts, we had conflict on...over everything, of the cattle, of offending, of swearing, of disagreements between spouses, we had multiple murders within the family, and very tough conflicts. I mean, we went with professor Anton's

²¹ Anton Çetta (1920-1995), folklore scholar.

²² Local Muslim clergy, mullah, muezzin.

²³ Xhevdet Hasan Breznica (03.12.1967-01.02.1990), national hero.

²⁴ Haxhi Zeka (1832-1902) was an Albanian nationalist leader and member of the League of Peja, an alliance which in 1899 tried to negotiate autonomy for Albanians within the Ottoman Empire. In this process, a truce was declared among people involved in feuds in order to unite against the Ottomans.

²⁵ 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.

²⁶ Hysen Tërpeza (1910-2002), was a leader of *Balli Kombëtar* (National Front) which was an Albanian nationalist, anti-communist organization established in November 1942, an insurgency that fought against Nazi Germany and Yugoslav partisans. It was headed by Midhat Frashëri, and supported the unification of Albanian inhabited lands.

message that, “Start from where it is the most difficult,” where we had to go many times in a row. Young women helped us a lot especially, student youth, Drita, Drita Konjufca, Vahide Retkoceri were the ones who deserve to be emphasized, one is a lawyer now...Gashi. She is a lawyer in Pristina, well known, she is a lawyer, she used to work for the police. I guess her name is Hilmije, anyways, I am not sure about it, you can find her in Pristina more easily because maybe I will remember it later. They helped, the student youth...teachers, professors, *hoxha*...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How were you informed about these cases?

Ismail Gashi: We were informed by the people of various settings who are...I had that cooperative, that's where our center of reconconcilators was. They always came there, the Democratic League, political processes, I always shared the news through fax. I had a fax there and I shared the news, it was a kind of a little information center, I shared the news and people came, they brought the news. Let's say there is the case of a fight between people that happened long ago, they haven't been talking to each-other for a long time, and this is how we got the information, we established the units, the groups who were supposed to go, there at my cooperative there was a small container, a three room office, we gathered there, but there were no fewer actions of reconcilers within smaller localities.

I know we went to Drenica two or three times, but the *Drenicak*,²⁷ the villages of Shala, Krojmir, Petreshtica consist of a small entity which has its center in Shala. They did it themselves, reconciliations were done by their teachers and students, they invited us two-three times just because we were a little older. Just like we invited Anton Çetta when we had gatherings, we had a gathering in Bujan, one in Veshec, a reconciliation gathering in Smallusha, as I mentioned, we had a reconciliation gathering in Bujan and in Gadime as well.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did you say to people, what were the main arguments?

Ismail Gashi: In gatherings, usually in gatherings when we asked people to reconcile it was not because some person had sent us there, but but we are asking you for the reconciliation on behalf of this people, of this country and of this hard situation because we cannot move forward otherwise. If tomorrow they show up, let's say a frontline, or a conflict with our enemies, if we fear each-other, if I have feuds with the person behind me, we had this kind of discussions. We cited *bac Adem's* words, a lot of them, “Brave is not one who pulls the finger of crime, but rather the one who extends the hand of reconciliation,” like this. Sometimes it turned into a campaign [smiles], because reconciliations were a kind of campaign in one way or another, there are chances there were defects on it as well, there are chances...

Part Two

Ismail Gashi: I hear many say, and I heard them say, “I was the leader of the Reconciliation Movement in this municipality and that municipality.” Even in our municipality they say that Avdi Kelmendi was the leader. We never chose a leader. Even Anton Çetta himself did not... this is my opinion, don't take it for granted. There was never a group elected as leaders. There Mark Krasniqi,²⁸ let's say, Kajtaz Rrecaj,

²⁷ *Drenicak*, refers to the people coming from Drenica.

²⁸ Mark Krasniqi (1920-2015), ethnographer and writer.

Muhamet Pirraku,²⁹ there was Ramiz Kelmendi,³⁰ they were with, around Anton, with Anton, but they were not chosen. Not even Anton, he said it himself several times, “I am not the leader of the Reconciliation, I am a reconciler, an activist who does the walk.” People wanted him around because he had his ways, he was a natural. He spent time in the *oda*, for 15 years he worked in Drenica, on folklore, he collected folk songs, he learned the *oda* mentality. Yes, but whenever we had a more relaxed conversation, he would say, “I did not know who my people are. Only now have I learned about the people, because I didn’t 70 years ago. How many dark stains they had, suffering in such ugliness, tormented within by the conflict of revenge.”

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was it difficult entering *oda* and suggesting people to reconcile?

Ismail Gashi: No, at some point, at some point, at some point, at some point, to be honest it was easier for those of us who were men and who were a little older. But, I always, when we went as groups we usually had many girls and it seemed that girls hesitated a little in the beginning, that’s why we had to privilege them, to make them sit in the main spot. And they were more privileged, because they deserved it, the ones I mentioned. They helped us a lot, Nekibe Kelmendi,³¹ Sanije Gashi³² who was an editor-in-chief at *Kosovarja* [The Kosovar].³³ She got women very engaged here.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What about changing their minds? Changing the mentality? Because reconciliations did change the mentality inside the *oda* a little. How difficult was that first, then convincing them?

Ismail Gashi: It has changed, it has changed because the cases are...There are special cases which couldn't change. When the disagreements were very deep, closer to the *farefisi*,³⁴ more inside *farefisi*. Or when let’s say men were killed and women were left alone, we had to take the women [activists]. Because women whose husbands were killed were the ones who had to give the word of reconciliation, yes, the state that not reconciling, the feuds will impoverish you economically and spiritually, because it impoverishes the people, because one cannot go out to work the field, to plant potatoes, to plant wheat, to plant seeds, there will be shortages in the market, there will be less, there will be less and that’s how the people get impoverished. As for the other spiritual side, you will always think about the blood that they took, about the blood you owe, about how to kill them? When to kill them and once I kill them I will go to prison, what will my children and my wife do, my daughter, my son? That was a burden that weighed on people’s arms, to, almost to impatience. To impatience. So, reconciliations were useful. Anton of course, professor Anton used to say that, “You reconciled, but it will be hard for you, save it! You shouldn’t ruin it! You fixed it, but you shouldn’t ruin it!”

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What kind of cases did you reconcile? Were you more a reconciler, or a mediator?

²⁹ Muhamet Pirraku (1944-2014), historian.

³⁰ Ramiz Kelmendi (1930-2017), a journalist and writer.

³¹ Nekibe Kelmendi (1944-2011), was lawyer and human right activist, after the war she was a member of Parliament for the LDK and served as Minister of Justice from 2008 through 2010.

³² Sanije Gashi (-), journalist, publicist, women’s rights activist.

³³ In this case, the Kosovo woman, as *Kosovarja* is the feminine gender of Kosovar.

³⁴ *Fis* is the Albanian exogamous kinship group that like the Latin gens includes individuals who share an ancestor. *Fis* can be defined as a patrilineal descent group and an exogamous unit whose members used to own some property in common. Membership in a *fis* is based on a common mythical male ancestor

Ismail Gashi: No, we were reconcilers, with groups of friends, with the youth, with...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Could you tell us about some cases?

Ismail Gashi: Yes, we had, for example two-three people were killed in Smallusha, it was a property conflict. They left their wives and children behind. We went not only once, but many times, many times. We also took, as I said, Sanije and Nekibe with us to talk with the women there, to convince them, because the brother-in-law, how to say, the only man who had remained, two of his brothers were killed and he was the only man who had remained and it was not easy for him to forgive [the bloods], because he was concerned about what his sisters-in-law would say, the ones whose husbands were killed, or their children.

That's a problem within the family, of course we have to understand it, because we are on other levels now, we are supposed to understand. And of course there was a need to have Nekibe with us there, to have another Nekibe or another female student, female teacher, female professor, female journalist, to talk to them and tell them that, "You cannot live in peace if you don't forgive. You will have a better living if you forgive, because he will not come back. If you forgive, you will set your children free, you will discharge spiritually, you and your children will be more free, your life will be more open, our environment will open. And just as the saying goes, even the sky will open."

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Any other case?

Ismail Gashi: We had cases for example when one was killed in Krajmir, he killed his brother's son. They were killed outside and we had to say to him, "Forgive your brother for killing your son." And he managed to forgive but when we said, "Come with us to your brother's," Mulla Idriz Kokrruku was with us, he helped us a lot, you know because he was more often with us, Anton as well, but he was even more often than Anton, he said, "I can't come." He also had his father, their father was alive. He was an old man, 85 years old. "Come with us, *bac*" we said to him, "Come with us to your other son's, we will send the forgiveness to him." "How can I come, *more*?³⁵" He said. "Because not only are we embarrassed, but we also spent a lot, we spent a lot of money on lawyers, defending him and this one." Asking this and that for money. They sold everything they had, his son was killed and not only were they in enmity with each-other, but it also impoverished them. There were various cases. Each of them deserves to be mentioned. They even had conflicts over a bridge, "Why are you building it here? Why does it have to pass in front of my doors. It bothers me, build it further." Or over property. Sometimes I thought that it was even a moral issue. I don't want to mention it in such cases.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were you in *oda*? I'd like to know how was *kanun*³⁶ discussed there. Not *kanun*, but blood feuds as a phenomena. Because many say that it is not ours, it was imposed to us, and...

³⁵ Colloquial: used to emphasize the sentence, it expresses strong emotion. *More* adds emphasis, like *bre*, similar to the English *bro*, brother.

³⁶ *Kanun*, customary law, the unwritten law that regulates all aspects of life in the mountain areas of Northern Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro. A written version, the *Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini*, was compiled by the Franciscan monk Shtjefën Gjeçovi in 1910-1925.

Ismail Gashi: We talked and see, because let's say there was also a useful political situation at the time, the foreign country because we were always under foreigners slavery and we still are. These were helpful of course, and of course the Serbian State didn't feel bad, neither did the previous occupier for the fact that Albanians were being killed, especially Serbs didn't feel bad about it. That's our closest enemy physically, but also the one we've spiritually suffered in the worst way. And that enemy planted the seeds for Albanians to have troubles between each-other. It planted that and the ruling power helped it, or they asked their collaborators or the people who were closer to them, who were more sympathetic to them, right? They encouraged them to fight someone else, because they didn't feel bad at all about seeing Albanians killing each-other. We used such cases, even in reconciliations because the situation was like that.

We were actually in the frontline with Milošević, with Serbia which was our historical enemy. Our historical enemy, and they started using stricter masses towards us, we had to face them. In those big gatherings, such as Verrat e Llukës which gathered over 500 thousand people, where it was also shown that... and what was happening here was a little sad for Serbia, because there were also other gatherings besides the one at Verrat e Llukës, there were other gatherings as well. We had a gathering in the village of Gadime, not as big as the one [in Verrat e Llukës], but there were tens of people gathered, and people spoke there, they appealed, "Forgive the bloods, get closer to each-other, talk to each-other, don't be in enmities, stay away from feuds." I believe that all of these had their influence.

It even seems to me like you mentioned the changing of the mentality. It has changed a little thanks to them. It's positive. It's positive. Even today when I spend time with people, usually in the mournings, because I am not engaged in politics now and I am retired, I am not engaged in political activities, but I have remained as a *plak*³⁷ in mourning and I go, I always mention how we reconciled. We didn't only reconcile the feuds, but also in politics. We reconciled politically as well, we don't stand against each-other anymore. I mentioned the case of Fadil Hoxha and Hysen Tërpeza, yes.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What kind of conflict was that? What did they represent?

Ismail Gashi: Yes, Hysen Tërpeza was a *ballist*,³⁸ he escaped for 50 years, he remained abroad. Fadil Hoxha was a partisan commander, I mean, he was a high leader. Both of them were present in a gathering in Pristina and Muhamet Pirraku was talking to some other friends, "Can we ask them to reconcile? To hug each-other?" And they...they accepted.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: During Reconciliations?

Ismail Gashi: Not during Reconciliations, it happened a little later, but it was a good episode of the political reconciliations. They even were, because Hysen was a commander-in-chief of Balli and Fadil was a commander-in-chief of partisans, when they hugged, "I am forgiving it to you, and...everything,

³⁷ *Plak, Pleqnarë* has the same roots as *pleq*, elderly, traditionally the mediators in a blood feud reconciliation. Here: a respected man whose word is heard in various men gatherings.

³⁸ Member or supporter of *Balli Kombëtar* (National Front) which was an Albanian nationalist, anti-communist organization established in November 1942, an insurgency that fought against Nazi Germany and Yugoslav partisans. It was headed by Midhat Frashëri, and supported the unification of Albanian inhabited lands.

because I'd kill you if I met you." He said, "You'd kill me if you met me." (smiles) They hugged each-other and left the big enmity behind. To me that was a great agreement. Of the political level, also the national level.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So, you told the people that blood feuds were not ours as a tradition?

Ismail Gashi: It's, it's... fictional. It might've been imposed to us but we have made it worse. Even though, looking at it traditionally, historically, it might've been planted since the time of the [Ottoman] Empire, because that's how *Kanun* treats it. *Kanun* is not recent, it's medieval, but nobody had *Kanun* back then, we were the only one to have. Because Albanians are special in the sense that they have testimonies of being an old nation, because our Flag is one of the oldest Flags in Europe, but also the *Kanun*, other nations did not have the *Kanun*. No matter the severity we have, it should not be used nowadays, because we have legal norms, we have the juridical system. It would be better if we worked for the past, even though it cannot be removed, it cannot be removed easily.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Could you tell us how was it at Verrat e Llukës?

Ismail Gashi: There was a big mass at Verrat e Llukës. I know it was taken from the central level.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were you there?

Ismail Gashi: Yes, I was. It's a... Reconciliation gatherings took place there historically, even at the time of Haxhi Zeka and earlier. It was held there with the intention of keeping the tradition. People from all around Kosovo came there. As far as I know, there were 60 bloods forgiven there. I know that they went there and sent the letter that, "I forgive the blood of my son, my brother, my father." I know that they went, they went there and then I mean. Besides some tens of bloods that were notified that would be forgiven. It was a very great ceremony, very positive, very historical for Albanians. Even though in the circumstances that we all know.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was that day?

Ismail Gashi: The police didn't intervene. I've heard that on our way back police stopped people in various regions. They tried to use, to prove that they were there, that they could use violence and so on. They never stopped violence, they never did, but that gathering which was a very great one couldn't be stopped even if it was provoked by tens of policemen, that was not something that could be stopped, that was one, one big volcano.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were you an activist of *LDK* at that time? *LDK* was still recent at the time, right?

Ismail Gashi: *LDK* was the only political party...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You were there as a member of *LDK*, right?

Ismail Gashi: Ah?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: While you were helping in Reconciliations, did you go there as an activist or as a member?

Ismail Gashi: No, no, no, we went to Reconciliations normally. We mentioned the party sometimes as well, because that was a political process, that thing was positive. But we didn't go there as political party members. We went there as Albanian, as equal people. Even though those other three-four political parties we had were very minor compared to the Democratic League, but you know, they existed. Because the Human Rights Council played its role as well, since it was established earlier than the Democratic League, on November 14, '98 I guess, the Democratic League is in December 23...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: '88?

Ismail Gashi: '98, no '89, '89, '89 because I mistook the years. But they had their own function, people enjoyed that movement, that resurrection, that resurrection. No matter the violence, that resurrection was the power of resistance, you know, a power of resistance. An energy that was obvious, because one might've thought that this nation was enslaved, was enslaved, yes, it was enslaved, but it had the energy for resistance, it had the energy. And I mean, it was proven. We didn't leave by chance the state educational system, we separated, we separated it in the '90s from Serbia and we made it independently in houses, schools, because if we didn't do that, we would remain four, nine years behind. A 7-year-old would have to be in the same grade with a 15-year-old. We would have cut the chain of the continuity of the educational system for eight years.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you organize the educational [system]... through *LDK*, or through local activism?

Ismail Gashi: See, at some point we had to create some governing bodies because we had declared a Republic back then, and that Republic was not recognized internationally, but we recognized it from within, because we recognized our being, we had that Republic because we established state institutions. We had the Financial Council for example, the way we called it back then, the Educational Council, these were not political party subjects. They were established from *LDK* because it had 90% [of the votes], they were established through *LDK*. But, since the Ministry was abroad, we had the decision, for example I took, the leader of Education, I took it from Bicaq, it was signed by the Minister of Education of the Republic of Kosovo. I was assigned the position of leader of the Education Council on August 1, '95. I received that decision after three days. I mean, the government existed, not the political party, but that government was established by the political parties. We had an Assembly. We had an Assembly where all the political parties had some deputies depending on how big they were. It is known that *LDK* had around 80% of the seats, because we were bigger, we were larger. Because after the war I was not engaged in any party and in *LDK* either. I was in the General Council of *LDK*, until the last mandate, the one when we almost got destroyed, and then I left the political party.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you spend the time of war? How was the war?

Ismail Gashi: I stayed here during the war, I was here during the bombings, not in this apartment but somewhere else. I have moved here three years ago. I live here with my wife and my daughters who is married in Tirana, she stays here most of the time. I stayed in Lipjan the first night because of my work,

the second night I went to my village, Sllovia. I stayed there until April 15 [1999], on April 15, they attacked Sllovia where they killed 45 Albanians, the village that suffered the most. I went to the mountains, then the next day I went to Smallusha. I stayed there until April 27, in April 27 I went to Ferizaj until May 20, when I moved to Macedonia. Since May 20, I stayed there for one month, not a full month, I stayed in Gostivar. Then I returned after the war.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you lose anyone during the war?

Ismail Gashi: No, only relatives, close, *farefis* or of a wider *rreth*, not from my house. Because many in my village were killed. 45 [people] were killed there.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: By locals or by Serbian paramilitary forces?

Ismail Gashi: There were locals, there were Serbian locals as well as paramilitary forces. Everybody who could kill, did so there. The village was attacked at 1:30 o'clock, from both sides, everybody who could shoot, did so there. I was even the first one to attempt escaping, I was the first one who escaped (smiles). I went to a hill over the village, I saw the mess where you could not realize what was happening, when we thought in the end 45 [people killed] I said, "That's the least in the end, we survived easily." Because it was attacked very badly. Then we had 72 Serbian houses inside [the village], they had kept people there.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did they wear [uniforms]?

Ismail Gashi: Around 26 of them wore [uniforms], 26-27 of them were thus dressed. Mobilized as reserve policemen, as reserves of the army, only with uniforms.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What about when you returned then as refugees from Gostivar?

Ismail Gashi: From Gostivar, I first returned to my village where I spent one week, because I had left my paralyzed father there. My father was paralyzed when I left, my father lived with me for 25 years but my big brother kept him during those days. And I was afraid he would die before I saw him, and all the efforts I did would go to waste. I found him alive, but he died after one week. Then after one week I came to my apartment. We organized other things then, the mourning across the municipality's territory, also in my Sllovia, we had the mutual mourning of the school, because we had 37-38 families whose people were killed. One person could not come for condolences to 37-38 families in two days. That's why we organized it in the school, we called those people. One or two from each house, for seven days, and buses came from Peja, [with those] who had heard about it. We had announced the 45 people who were killed, and the mourning is like this and like that.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you become an activist after the war then?

Ismail Gashi: I didn't become an activist after the war. I worked as an adviser for high schools in the municipality, to be honest it's not that I did an effective job then, because reforms took place, and foreigners came with some forms giving some lectures and trainings us, "No, the school should be kept like this, not like that." I am not against improving, but the Albanian school has a tradition. It has a tradition which we didn't give up even during those ten years of occupation. We removed the ideological

system in our lectures, we removed communism, we removed brotherhood-unity, we added Informatics as a subject exactly during the occupation, while we were under occupation.

We added Civic Education to the Education, we added it during those ten years of occupation, because I led them myself, I know how we agreed even at the national level, with Albania as well. Or even five subjects which are material for a national [curriculum], Language, History, Geographics, Musical Art, Figurative Art, we added the Albanian fields which were not present at the time of communism. We made a national education program, and this was no small thing, but the circumstances were like that, 1000 children were taught in one private house, 38 children sat in a 4X4 room. That is when this woman from Belgrade for Human Rights, I forgot her name...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Nataša Kandić?³⁹

Ismail Gashi: Yes Kandić, when she once came, because she came to Lipjan many times...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: During the '90s?

Ismail Gashi: She came, "Can I enter the private school?" "Yes, *more*." When she entered, she told me herself, in this private [parallel education] school, "If I were not doing what I do in the Milošević system... I would never accept to work, or I would work as a taxi driver." But in Milošević's system, how does he not feel embarrassed for the children, 40 children sweating in such small setting, without a blackboard, with some thick *doske*⁴⁰ ..to sit on, to sit on. We didn't have furniture...we didn't have any inventory there.

Not the Ministry...now it doesn't make sense to speak, I am a little, to be fully objective, we don't, we don't go out, the way we are speaking, we don't go out, even in the sense of a government. These people went to exile, I don't know what they did. I know more about Education businesses because I was related to it. We had three people here who did the job of the Minister: Abdyl Rama, Xhavit Ahmeti and Rexhep Osmani. These were the ones who invited us, leaders of education in the municipalities, every second week or even more often or less, depends on how they wanted, and we talked to them there, how to do this and that, let's elect the directors, let's open a vacancy for a teacher, we will do this, I mean, we governed in collaboration with these three.

I met the Minister once in Tirana. I went there for some other work, I didn't go for it, I met the Minister in Tirana, Mr.Bicaj. Because he was abroad, I mean, maybe they sent programs or something to them, but I don't think so, because we took everything in collaboration with Albania, we were more open back then. Now it's only that *abetare* [primer] we did and they even forgot, I don't know whether they are implementing it or not. We made a single *abetare* for the Albanian nation, we distributed it there and here, but nobody checked whether it is being used or not. I know that in Albania they use at least two or three. Not to talk about the other things we didn't do. We had this program even before the war, to make single national texts, to create the national school calendar. We thought about not making the start of the school in different dates, on [September] 1 and 15, but to make it either on the 1st or the 15th. We

³⁹ Nataša Kandić (1946-), is a Serbian human rights activist and the founder and ex-executive director of the Humanitarian Law Center, an organisation campaigning for human rights and reconciliation in the former Yugoslavia, focusing on the Serbian role in conflict.

⁴⁰ Serbian: planks.

wanted to make it the same for both countries, for all the Albanians, you know. Now I am going deep, let's not go to this discussion.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You mean, the communication back then was much better than after the war?

Ismail Gashi: Now, now we are free to go to Albania, I go...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I mean, at the institutional level.

Ismail Gashi: Now I also have friends, and I go there on Saturdays and Sundays. Sometimes during the summer we go to the seaside, but only on weekends, our son comes with his wife as well, I go with my old lady, I don't dare call her old, with my wife, but for you I will call her old (smiles). Because we go now, it is free, we have the freedom to go and we even go faster because of the highway. However, I don't think we are doing well in the sense of national integration, it doesn't seem to me that we are doing well. We can do much more. The school text should've been one, they should've done the curriculum how they are calling it nowadays, not to take the Romanian curriculums and translate them into Albanian and materialize it into Albanian and not take theirs [Albania's]. Theirs, or sit and make one together, we have experts.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You mentioned that you were part of this *Lëvizja Nacional-Çlirimtare* [National-Liberation Movement], they were pro unity and had some ideas about Albania, how did you abandon those ideas?

Ismail Gashi: *Bac Metush*, *bac Metush*⁴¹ was the difference, I believe that, I have that opinion, maybe it's not true, but I know that pretty much is, he was not an *Enverist*.⁴² Sometimes he even said, "Look, don't speak ill of him, don't do it, because it doesn't make sense, but don't go out in Europe and say to someone, to a German, or to a French, 'Marxism- Leninism,' he [the German] has Marx but he makes no mention of him." I mean the difference was between him and *bac Adem* [Demaçi], *bac Metush* was totally different. He was more immense, more immense, more skillful. He wanted to work, he wanted to work and had more intelligence in his works, but the danger was of course big. We didn't withdraw from that, in my opinion this road cannot be stopped, but in future circumstances somebody says, don't mention it because we will be united within Europe. It's not good for us to be united in Europe, but when we are united...we have a certain border line, that is totally formal, we also have the same language, the same history, we have the same tradition, we should have the same *abetare*, we should have the same Flag.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When did you retire?

Ismail Gashi: Eh?

⁴¹ Metush Krasniqi (1928-1986) was a Kosovo Albanian educator and activist. Krasniqi was known for running illegal nationalist organizations such as The Revolutionary Party for Uniting Albanian Territories with the Motherland and the National-Liberation Movement of Kosovo and other Albanian Regions in Yugoslavia. Krasniqi was imprisoned several times by the Yugoslav regime between the years 1958- 1986. The last time he was taken to prison, the tortures he was submitted to led to his death.

⁴² Member of the Albania Party of Labor, or supporter of Enver Hoxha, Leader of the Albanian Communist Party who ruled Albania as a dictator until his death in 1985.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When did you retire?

Ismail Gashi: On June 14, 2010.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What do you do now? How do you organize your time?

Ismail Gashi: Now I do nothing, I do nothing. Sometimes I scribble something. But I didn't work, I didn't know how to write when I was young (smiles). Now, because of so much free time, I have to pretend to write something in order to kill time.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Would you like to add something?

Ismail Gashi: Thank you very much, thank you very much! If there is something good I said, then keep it, if not, then just drop it.