

INTERVIEW WITH SALI CACAJ

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Duration: 133 minutes

Present:

1. Sali Cacaj (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

Sali Cacaj: [I am] Sali Cacaj from Deçan, born on September 1, 1951, in the Cacaj family of Deçan.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Mister Cacaj, can you tell us about your early youth memories, your family and the *rreth*¹ you were raised in?

Sali Cacaj: Yes, we have lived in a family community since the time I can remember, around over forty family members. We lived in the old part of Deçan, of the village of Deçan. The infrastructure of our house was... a house on the western side of the main street on the way to the village, a house on the right side, a three story *kulla*,² followed by another two story *kulla*, and inside [in the yard] there was a well, there still is. It was around thirty meters deep, there was a part for the cattle which we called *posllomi*.³ We had baskets, two baskets. There was the black mulberry tree as well as the rainier cherry tree, the garden and everything else that reminds me of it, the quince tree and everything else that reminds me of my early childhood.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was life in a [family] community?

Sali Cacaj: To be honest, I value the life of that time. I realize it was a very sophisticated organization, there was a family hierarchy which I remember, the head of the household was like the president of an organization nowadays, or someone who was highly respected.

It was an unique harmony. I never noticed any arguing between men and women. Everybody had their tasks. I only realized that later, because I didn't understand it at the time, but I only understood the hierarchy and the very good organization later, not to say a very accurate organization for the time, and I can say, a pretty perfect organization.

The males, or men of the house shared work, somebody looked after the sheep, somebody else after

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 Traditional, fortified Albanian house, tower.

³ *Posllom*, stable.

the cows, the other one was at the mill, because we also had a mill near the center of Deçan. It was around one hundred and fifty meters from our house. The mill is still under the protection of cultural heritage. The mill was very old, yes, in front of the Old Municipality Assembly of the municipality of Deçan, and the mill had three stones, that's how we called it, and I know that the people who came to grind [wheat] were from the region of the river Drin, from Ura e Shejtë [The Holy Bridge], foreigners, people, and all the surrounding villages, not only of the municipality of Deçan, but from Gjakova as well, from the surroundings of Peja, because the mill was in the center. When people went to the hills, they brought their wheat to grind on the way back, and [they took it] two or three days later, the mill stayed opened for twenty four hours, so people could take it any time, they found it there, so that they didn't have to carry it [to the hills] then send it back home.

The mill was... two-three people worked there, in case one of them was sick, the other one replaced him. Since we are talking about the mill, *baba*⁴ Zymer worked at the mill, then *baba* Isuf, who was the head of the household. In the meantime, for short periods of time, it was usually not a very hard physical work and the other ones worked there as well, such as *baca*⁵ Demë and then my father Asllan or Azllan, that's how people called him. *Baca* Hamëz worked there as well as *baca* Bekë and we, the youth, used to hang out there because there was a lamp at the place where the miller stayed.

There was a fireplace there, a bed that was higher than the nowadays sofas, the bed was not exactly for two persons, it was small, for one person, a little wider than for one person. It had a characteristic because it was made of planks, the mill was made of stones, while the divide was made of planks. There was a window in the inner part which served to see whether someone was entering the mill during the cold season, that was its function at the mill.

Another characteristic was that beyond the bedroom, the room where the miller stayed, there was a door which could not be noticed, the plank was a cut similar to the planks that were used inside, that was a 3x2 area, and they used it to hide the important stuff, such as food, or a person, in case they had not pleasant relations with the [ruling] power, there were always things that were hidden back then.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us about your close family?

Sali Cacaj: Yes. My grandfather had four brothers. One of them had no children, Tahir. While others, Halil had children, Imer had children and my father was alone, he had one sister who had died very early from tuberculosis. Then my father had two children, twins... but they didn't live, then other children of his didn't live either, then it's us, two brothers and six sisters.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Where did you go to school?

Sali Cacaj: I finished elementary school in Deçan. Middle school... I finished elementary school in Deçan, it was three-four hundred meters from the old part of Deçan. Riza Alaj was my first teacher, who also taught me in the second year of elementary school. He was a person with an extraordinary

⁴ See *bac* below.

⁵ *Bac*, literally uncle, is an endearing and respectful term for an older person.

look. He looked like Hollywood artists, he was tall, with a look that I can freely say for that time... later we watched Hollywood movies, Rock Anson [Hudson] and many other artists, such as Humphrey Bogart and so on, but our teacher, I only noticed later that he didn't differ from them in looks, nor in beauty, nor elegance.

He was a perfect man, very strict, very mature, very wise, very authoritative, very charismatic, and in a sense he was the inspiration of my pedantry, maybe I am not that pedant, but I got it from him. Later, he was the director of the [school] in Deçan, later he became a director in Prizren and later I know that he was the director of the Kosovo Television for a very long time.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What do you remember from elementary school, I mean, something more?

Sali Cacaj: I remember many things. I remember that our teacher was very committed, because those times were different from nowadays, because we only took the knowledge, writing, the knowledge of the world and other things from our teachers and professors. While nowadays it is a time when everything is learned from the internet, from everyday life. I remember our teacher Riza Alaj with great respect, first he was very close, very friendly, very warm, how to say, very soulful, but at the same time very strict. Once he said that something is like this, there was no other way.

Back then, at the time of our childhood, we played with soccer teams, we would divide [in teams] and play, when the snow fell we would play with snowballs. We built snowmen many times. Then, we held the soccer tournaments which were played among classes, which class would win. I remember them, because I have always been an activist of games, of soccer as well as of running.

Then, my second grade teacher was Qemajl Doroshi, in third grade. Professor Rizaja had a misfortune sometime by the end of the second grade, he was injured. I remember it since then, I don't know who, but I remember they shot him here {points to the injured spot}. I don't know, they had an indirect conflict and we cried because we thought our teacher was killed, and I remember for a long time then, when I watched Albanian films on the Albanian Television [RTSH], there was a film about a teacher being killed, and it always reminded me of... our teacher was killed very early. But, fortunately he survived. It was just a small injury, I guess it was indirect, a conflict, I don't remember more about it.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What do you remember of your life at that time, because you are also the generation right after the Second World War. What do you remember about that social aspect, how did change happened, I mean socialism?

Sali Cacaj: Back then we didn't...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you know that?

Sali Cacaj: We were in Deçan, we knew that there was... as children we were afraid of the police, of course we were afraid of the ruling power, of the army, of... *Pleqtë*⁶ told us about the wars that took place in different periods of time. My father, I like to call him my *at*⁷ [father] because this is Albanian.

⁶ *Pleq*, elderly, traditionally the mediators in a blood feud reconciliation.

⁷ *At*, father. This word is rarely used in modern Albanian, which uses the word *baba*, adapted from Turkish:

He was one of those who participated in the the Second World War. He was injured. Actually, they told me that our relatives were forced to participate in wars because the ruling power of that time forced people to do it.

Their orientations weren't communist in any way and... but they were part of some other patriotic things, at their level, with the capacities they had. They had a very wide circle of friends. They were a very generous family, *bogatstvo*,⁸ because I don't remember my house, because we went there late, because it was a house hierarchy in men's *oda*⁹ or in a *kuvendi* of men, because it should be called *kuvendi*, not men's *oda*, because *oda* and *soba*¹⁰ are both Turkish. I know that we had that hierarchy, we had *kuvendi* or men's *oda*, how they call it now, in the three story *kulla*. There was a wooden part outside, there was another area for the youth on the third floor and it had a fireplace as well.

Instead, in the house below, in the two story house, there were four bedrooms inside the *kulla*, on its second floor. Each of the bedrooms had its bathroom, the way it was at that time, in order to warm the water at home and carry it to clean upstairs. It was a characteristic that in our house there was only one staircase, because the cattle were on the ground floor, I mean mainly cows and horses, while the sheep were in another part because they needed more room.

There was the same characteristic almost in every *kulla*, but they changed them with time, because I worked a lot on *kulla*. I photographed them, I have around ten-fifteen thousands photographs, maybe a lot more. Over fifty thousands slides were burned in my house in total, but we will talk about this later. And that characteristic was that the back door in the lower part of the stable was locked. There was a *shul* [latch], some call it *shul* while some other call it *drom*. It was taken out of the wall and its dimensions were about 12-13 X 12-23 centimeters, it was made of chestnut tree, very strong, and we took it out of a part of the wall in order to put it inside the other part and lock the door, and there was no chance for anyone to open it from the outside.

But, it was characteristic that there was a staircase inside and they went upstairs through it, then the second floor was connected to the other part [of the *kulla*], and it was also connected with it from the outside. On the second floor, there was the house, on the right side of the ground floor there was a living room, how to say, the nowadays living room. There were some *shkëmb* [wooden stools] on which we used to sit, the floor was not paved. There was the area where dishes were washed, there was a big fireplace which was used to boil the water for everything and where the cooking was done, and there was a three meter-long window, like this with some small windows where *tamli* [milk], which now we call *qumësht*, was kept in buckets in order to make cream, which was one of the family processes to prepare food. And there was a part which they called *çarranik*, or the dairy place. That's where cheese and yogurt were kept, as well as pickles and other kitchen stuff, how to say, they were small storages, the [dairy] coming from the hills were not worth just one, but ten-fifteen *dinars*. Everyone [in the household] had thirty-fifty kilograms until spring, because they "caught" the cheese, this is how we say it, we ferment the cheese and the dairy in order to be safe with food until, until the

father.

⁸ Serbian: *bogatstvo*, wealth.

⁹ Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.

¹⁰ Serbian: *soba*, room.

spring season starts, so then we can gather food again.

And there was a staircase to the second floor there, our house is still burned, it's not totally demolished. It had a distinct trait, because it only had an around two meter-long corridor, and it was connected with the windows which were oriented to the street and there were six rooms, a high corridor, just like the ones in the schools, the rooms were bedrooms of people and their families. While in the upper part of the *kulla* there was a room, the women assembly or the girls room, as it was called. Its dimensions were around 5X6 meters or 6X6 meters. Women, girls, children, young mothers, the girls who were preparing their *çejz*¹¹ for marriage, the ones who prepared the *kana*¹² and the carpets, always. They made various things, handmade things, in order to sell them mainly at the market of Peja, but sometimes in Gjakova as well, in order to provide the financial means for their closer family's goods, besides the housekeeping that they did.

The housekeeping was done, I remember, everybody was given a certain part, how to say, a certain part of the money for their own needs. Then it is very interesting, I have also mentioned this in some of my memoirs which were destroyed during the war, some people whose last name I don't remember took from us.... They came from Prizren first, then from Gjakova, later I remember, when I grew up, they came from Peja. I remember one or two tailors would come and stay at our place for two nights, more than one night, two nights or three, took the measurement of every member of the family. Very interesting! I only understood its importance later. They took the measurement, and they would make the models of the pants as they were at that time, the *tirqe*¹³ for the elders, they would prepare them two-three weeks, and after two-three weeks they would come again and they [family members] would try them on, whether they were too small or too big, and the tailor would cut them right away with the scissors. It was, how to say, an extraordinary thing.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How many generations lived in the *kulla*?

Sali Cacaj: Three-four generations. Four generations lived in the *kulla*, yes. I mean, the grandfathers of almost each of us were alive, in most cases. There were cases when the great-great grandfathers of ours were alive as well. I don't remember my great-great grandfather. The ones who are older than I, some... *baba Sylla*, then *baca Hamëz*, *baba Zymer*, they are older, they also are... 87 or 90 years old, but they remember, they remember. I only remember my grandfather. I wore, and all the elders, wore the *opinga*¹⁴ which were made of leather, they were made of leather and they were embroidered in the upper part, wool socks, like they were...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You made all these on your own, right?

Sali Cacaj: Yes, yes, they made them themselves. No, they made them themselves. Women made

¹¹ Clothes and embroideries that fill up the bride's trousseau.

¹² *Kana* is a long lasting hair color. Women dyed their hair with it when they got married. In some places it is also used for different drawings/tattoos on the hands of the bride.

¹³ Tight-fitting embroidered white flannel breeches with decorative braids at the bottom of the legs and on the pockets, traditional Albanian wear.

¹⁴ Similar to moccasins, made of rubber or bovine leather, mainly used by villagers.

them at home. They made the socks, the *shoka*¹⁵ of the waist, they made the *shoka* for the *tirqe* themselves. They also made the shirts themselves, but not the *tirqe*. The *tirqe* and the vest of the *tirqe* and the *japon*, that's how we call the cape, and there was also the *herrka*. *Herrka* is a kind of bigger jacket with a headgear. It had no buttons, it had a wire which was tied this way {shows with hands}. I remember it as if it was today. I still see them sometimes here and there.

It had the headgear, and it surprisingly had short sleeves. And I remember it with short sleeves back then, yes, short sleeves because they needed to move, the woolen *mitan*¹⁶ and the *zhgun*¹⁷ made free movement impossible to work as much as it was needed at the time, while the cape, how they are calling it now, or the *japonxhë* how we called it back then, that was very heavy, I remember sometimes when I went to take it for my father, I was little and I could hardly carry it, it was all made of *zhgun*. It was only put on the shoulders, this part of it {points to his arm} was open for the arms, it had its headgear and the colors were white with a black rope and they were with... the dyeing of the clothes was made at home. It was dark brown, we called it "the black of the nut," I mean with nuts, they were dyed with the peel of the alder. But it was a coloring, I remember they never lost their color. The color stayed like that. I remember when they dyed them, I remember it. I was always interested in these old things, I still am.

I had many ethnographic things such as *jelek*,¹⁸ *tirqe*, some kinds of *opinga*, I also had the long underpants, surprisingly they didn't wear the *tirqe* during the summer, but they wore those long underpants. They had a layer of around seven centimeters, maybe a little more, it was, how to say, in the lower part, and was decorated with flowers and such, not in colors. They tied them at that time, there was no elastic, no.

To my surprise, the shirts were very distinctive, they had no collars, the ones we call Russian collars, they were without collars, they only had this part that comes out like this, open until here, here they had a square {points towards his chest} maybe a little bigger than 6X9 [centimeters], around 7X10, because I am a photographer and dimensions are a little professional deformation. And then they were tied, they used them during the summer. They were exactly like... they remind me of the Mexican movies, they were long a little over the knee, and they tied them in the waist with a *shoka* or with a scarf. But, they used them for some time, the white ones, they looked exactly like Mexicans with the white hat.

And the winter clothes, made of *zhgun*, as we call them, *tirqe* and the other things they wore, my grandfather had them all. I mean, until the day he died in '69, around 118 years old. My grandfather had the white *plis*,¹⁹ a white beard until here {shows with hands}. He was a shepherd. He was very soulful. Two elements which later, how to say, brought me to life during my readings, during the filming, when soulfulness came up for discussion, besides soulfulness and generosity and care of the

¹⁵ *Shokë* is a traditional Albanian male belt, made of loom-knitted woolen material knitted.

¹⁶ A vest with long sleeves that is buttoned up on the front. Part of the traditional Albanian costumes.

¹⁷ A long costume, like a coat with or without sleeves. Part of the traditional Albanian costumes.

¹⁸ Normal vest, part of the traditional Albanian costumes. Sometimes they were decorated with various ornaments.

¹⁹ Traditional white felt conic cap, differs from region to region, distinctively Albanian.

children, they were very careful to... it is not like that nowadays maybe. We were even a little passive, because they were too caring.

I remember two things of my grandfather, he was a shepherd, as the elders tell. There is a part of the hill which we call Nërkungje and while walking down, after the summer season came to its end, and the cold weather started, while climbing down to the plain, there is a hill near the spring, it is called Nërkungje, he found a deer, a very little deer. And he took the deer in order to feed it, he kept it in his stable during the whole winter and fed it, an extraordinary care, and to my surprise, when they went to the hills again in the spring, he left it in the exact place where he had found it earlier. This is something that would make me feel good no matter who did it, but now it makes me feel good exactly for the reason that it was my grandfather the one who had such a pure soul. They believed in God very much. They weren't declared as religious that much, but they believed in God. They went to the mosque to pray time after time, not always, but only in the *Juma*,²⁰ because the mosque was near. But, they did it more... because I noticed that there were no religious elements at home, there were no explanations for the things that we should not do, such as not whistling at night, cutting our nails at night, and many other things, we just shouldn't do them and that's it.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was it, as far as decision-making in the community goes?

Sali Cacaj: Let me not forget another thing about the old man, my grandfather. I remember when we were young and went to the mountains to work for the household needs, he said, "Wait a moment!" He took the *strajca*,²¹ you know what *strajca* is? What you put the axe in. He said, "No, because the trees in the mountain will cry, 'he will cut me, he will cut me'." We joked about it at the time, but later on I realized that it is a spiritual feeling, it had its own meaning to them, maybe it has little meaning to us today.

I think the decision-making was very good.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was it?

Sali Cacaj: When we grew up a little, because they didn't allow children to go to the *oda*, we would gather at night. For some period of time they allowed us to stay in the small *çerga*²² but only if we were disciplined, because they didn't allow us to stay very long. I remember we only stayed for one hour, not longer. It was like that for one month. Then after one month we were allowed to stay for two hours, the next month for four hours, five hours. Maybe they had a hierarchy, a kind of step by step in order not to be spoiled.

I know that when dinner was served, nobody started before the head of the household, he split the bread and I know that once he finished splitting the bread, he said, "Bon Appetit *të gjithëve*" [to all]. They actually said *tanve*, *të gjithëve* was used very little back then. We would start eating and the

²⁰ *Jumu'ah* is a congregational prayer (*şalât*) that Muslims hold every Friday, just after noon instead of the *Zuhr* prayer.

²¹ Albanian: *strajca*, sack; bag.

²² A traditional carpet made out of goat wool.

order of the meal was like that, that the one who is the last to finish, is the one who will clean the *sofra*²³ or the *sinija*.²⁴ Very interesting, you know. At first they did it in turns, week after week. Somebody did it one week, the other did it the next week, but then they made it like this.

During the time before the family community split, the one who finished the last, the one who wanted to eat slower was the one who cleaned the *sinija*. It was something that they called *ferratë*,²⁵ it was made of wood with an integrated part which was used to put the crumbs, which then were used to feed the birds with. We had a part in the yard close to the well where we put the crumbs to feed the birds, and we used other food to feed the dogs we had.

I remember that after dinner, the head of the household would sit in front of everyone, the older people would sit, my grandfather on the other side. Isuf was the head of the household, we called him *baba Isuf*. And he started, "Shall we start?" "Yes." "How was today?" he asked the shepherd. "Where did you send the sheep today?" "Here, here, here." "Did you have any problems?" "No." "Alright."

To the other one, "Where did you send the cows?" "Here, here, here," "Any problems?" "No." I mean, he asked each of them about the tasks they were given, whether they had any problems or troubles or disagreements with anyone. He did that all the time. And the next day he said, "Where do you want to send them tomorrow?" "I want to send them to the other part to graze, because there are several areas where I can send them." In case somebody had to go, the shepherd had to go to his wife's family or had any other need to see someone or go to a party, a wedding or something, then he was replaced....He said, "Demë, you will look after the sheep tomorrow. Be careful, because you are not used to them. He will come with you as well, take a boy to help you, because he will not be here today."

We were constantly engaged, ours were engaged... they sold, we had a lot of apples. I remember apples, "Hasi pears," how we call them, *hasi* and *hesë* have two different meanings. *Hesë* refers to eating while *Hasi*, things are from Has, the region of Has. I think in the Drenica region they call them *kakiqka* pears. Eh, we sold them in our region and later on we put them in baskets. We took the pears with big baskets, maybe as big as the half of this {points towards the seat in the room}, it had enough room, they put them there and sold them by the kilograms.

And as for the apples, I know they also sold them in Belgrade as well as in Zagreb, Subotica and Varazdin, Rijeka, Ljubljana, and here in Split, I remember it from that time. But, the train system was like that at the time, they sent them to Peja first, then in Peja they put them in a wagon. Then I know that we didn't see our parents during the whole winter, we only saw them in the winter break that lasted 21 days back then. We didn't see them because someone was in Zagreb, someone in Rijeka, Ljubljana, they sold a little in the market, [in bags of] two-three kilograms of apples, but they stayed there longer.

Many people told us how many people slept in the same room, I mean, people from different places,

²³ Low round table for people to gather at communal dinners, sitting on the floor.

²⁴ *Sinija*, big round baking dish, used, like *sofra*, to serve dinner.

²⁵ *Ferratë*, grain, mainly includes wheat and corn.

and others from our region went there to sell. Sometimes they sent us postcards from Ljubljana, I remember it seemed interesting to me, Franc Porsernin [unidentified] if I am not mistaken, then Emona, Ljubljana, the river Emona and so on.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What happened with this co-existence? Did you ever spread?

Sali Cacaj: Yes, yes, the increase in the number of family members and the needs of someone to live alone... because usually before people lived in family communities mainly, because we, I told you that we also had our mill. Our family had around three hundred ares²⁶ of land in a village at the outskirts of the municipality of Gjakova, it had the part for which they obtained the right of *çifçia*,²⁷ which was given to some locals for a long period under the laws of old ex-Yugoslavia and I don't remember whether it was over three, five or ten years where you were supposed to work the land, then they would be able to take around sixty-seventy percent of it.

The family community, I was around 13 and a half years old, I mean almost 14, we lived in a family community until around '64-'65. I was around 13 years and something old, 13-14 years old. We split as a family community by our own wish. One of my cousins came. There was no disagreements, no unpleasant feelings, no troubles, the [property] was split based on lot, there is a distinct trait that people don't get very mad when things like this are done based on lot, they say that that's their fate and it's done. The youngest one was the first who could choose in the lot, always, and the oldest one was the last. Like this, so in my family, my father was given the old *kulla*, the old *kulla* with the well where we had rainier cherry trees, black mulberry trees, the basket and a part of the *posllom*.

The *posllom* belonged to *baca* Demë, who took it and sent it to another part which was farther, and around two hundred meters from that part, he built his house in another field. The two story *kulla* belonged to *baba* Isuf, the head of the household who was an extraordinary worker, he was a man who worked day and night, but he only had one daughter, he had no son. He died a little before the war, in '98. He was around 95-96 years old when he died. My grandfather was one hundred something years old when he died, my grandmother was 99, like this, they lived long. Some more, some less. So, there was no conflict.

Then we lived in the *kulla* until '80. We lived in the *kulla* until around '79-'80. In '80 we built another house in the center of Deçan, a part of which was taken from us for the needs of the municipality in order to build a five-six story building which is still there. They took 16 ares at that time, and with that money we build a house behind that part, it was around 240 square meters. We had a very good house. There were 24 ares in the part where we lived, and it was burned during the war, it is still burned, and I was an activist of the reconciliations in that house that was burned during the war. Anton Çetta,²⁸ Azem Shkreli,²⁹ Bajram Kelmendi,³⁰ Ramiz [Kelmendi]³¹ and Esat Stavileci³² slept there.

²⁶ Are is a unit of area, equivalent to 100 square meters.

²⁷ From *Çifçi*, sharecropper, tenant farmer.

²⁸ Anton Çetta (1920-1995), folklore scholar, and leader of the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds Movement.

²⁹ Azem Shkreli (1938-1997), Albanian writer.

³⁰ Bajram Kelmendi (1937-1999) was a lawyer and human rights activist. He filed charges against Slobodan

Pajazit Nushi³³ mentioned it in one interview before he died that they slept there, they were all part of the elite. It is interesting that after we [the family] split, I met *arbëresh*³⁴ in '78, during my studies, but maybe later...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did you study?

Sali Cacaj: I was in Subotica, [I studied] Foreign Trade for some time. Then after two years of studying Foreign Trade there, how to say, they made an announcement for us to show up at the office of the university registrar. I went to the registrar. They said, "No, you didn't register in Foreign Trade, but Agronomy." I said, "No *more*,³⁵ I passed my exams, I have my transcripts, I have this, but no." "No," they said, "You should go to the dean." The dean told me that, "It is an order and this is the rule, there is nothing you can complain about, the law is the law the way they told you." I was surprised because I lived near him, my house was near his, on the opposite side, I am talking about when in Subotica. And when I left, he came to the door, I didn't expect him to, he said, "Don't bother with that business, because the state is behind this."

Then I didn't know, I didn't understand those things. I wasn't interested in Agronomy. I returned here. I talked to my father. We went to Gjakova, Bardhyl Çausi³⁶ was a family friend. We talked to him, and according to Bardhyl there was a trend to orient people mainly toward Agronomy and not the profiles which... in a sense, the state had selection power over many things like this, and that was the selection of the state. Then...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you decide to go to Subotica?

Sali Cacaj: I liked Foreign Trade. You know, like youngsters, some of us liked film, a friend of mine went to [study] Film, Murat went to Czech Republic. He went to Zagreb first, then there, but I had no opportunities to go there. It seemed very far from my family. I liked to become a cameraman, we like it more in the sense of image, because cameraman is a service that we all know, we thought differently about at the time.

My father was given the first signals of my orientation toward Foreign Trade in Subotica by Ibrahim

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.

³¹ Ramiz Kelmendi (1930-2017), a journalist and writer, also leader of the Reconciliation of Blood Feuds Movement. See interview on this website.

³² Esat Stavileci, (1942-2015), a lawyer and member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences.

³³ Pajazit Nushi, (1933-2015), university professor, psychologist, human right activist and President of the Academy of Arts and Sciences. See interview on this website.

³⁴ *Arbëreshë*, Albanian community called *Arbëresh*, which settled in Italy after the death of Skanderbeg in the fifteenth century.

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

³⁶ Bardhyl Çausi (1936–1999), lawyer and human rights activist, held in prison and killed during the 1999 NATO war. His remains were only found in 2005.

Mushkolaj, a *deçanas*³⁷ who was the head of custom and he told my father that this profile is important and has a strong perspective, and to be honest that is true.

Then I returned here to the [Faculty of] Economics. Like that.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In which year?

Sali Cacaj: In '74, '73, something like that.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were you part of the protests of '81?

Sali Cacaj: No, the protests took place later, because I went to military service in '78, '79.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you describe that part of your life. You studied, then you went to...?

Sali Cacaj: In the studies here we had x number of people of various generation. Even during middle school, I was engaged in sports activities as well as drama. I played for the school team in sports activities, I played [soccer] for the team of Deçan for several years, the team Kurrsdier at the time, it was named after a hill and competed in the sub-league, this is how we called it back then. Sub-league, one sub-league consisted of around four-five cities such as Klina, Istog, Peja, Gjakova and so on, it's like the regions nowadays, we can call it regional.

I played in the sub-league, I held number two and number five. I played friendly matches at the time, three matches under the Kosovo representation, one of them in Peja and two others in Gjakova. I had the first place in the Gymnasium³⁸ of Deçan in the three thousand meters race, and once in the Kosovo [national] level together with my cousin who has passed away, we both took the first place, both of us Cacaj in three hundred meters, the *Cross* [English] that was at that time. Like this.

And as for the studies, we had friends from our generation, we lived in the dormitories that were located near the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Economics. In the old dormitories, the former military barracks. Then I lived in the Dormitory number 1, 2, 3. The third, I also lived in the Dormitory number 3.

Then in '74-'75 the Seminar for Albanian Language and Culture took place. That is where I met *arbëresh*. There was Antonio Belushi who is still alive, as well as Karmelo Kandreva who was a regional director of Education and Culture in Cosenza, then there was Zef Keramota or Mozakaj, who still often comes to the seminar, then Ernest Stoqi, who was a geologist. There was Nat Furtino, who passed away three years ago, an *arbëresh* priest, one of the greatest miracle workers of the Catholic Church in the Vatican, he wrote many books on the unity of religions.

Emanuelo Jordani was also a priest, then he became a Cardinal, he was a good friend of mine. I know him, I was...At that time I knew them through the *arbëresh*, the desire to know our people, the

³⁷ *Deçanas*, people coming from Deçan.

³⁸ A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

arbëresh. There were two-three books: *Shpirti i Arbërit Rron* [The Spirit of Arbër Lives], *Gjaku i Arbrit Rron* [The Blood of Arbër Lives] and *Gjaku i Shprishur* [The Blood Undone]. And, there were some very different motives there, very different, to me it was a different motivation to go beyond the *rreth* we were in, because at that time we only watched, we only listened to [Radio] Kukës. We listened to [Radio] Tirana and the television, we were mainly... we watched movies. Maybe the main motivation to save our identity was firstly the family, secondly the school and then the television, maybe the inspiration of national feeling [was] through various films and drama.

That was with the *arbëreshë*, then I met Ymer Jaka in those times, Anton Çetta, professor Anton, Mark Krasniqi,³⁹ even though Mark Krasniqi visited our house many times when I was young. He was collecting oral stories, he asked elders and people from the closer *rreth* about *kanunore*⁴⁰ things. That is when I met Latif Berisha,⁴¹ President Rugova,⁴² we knew each other since then, I also knew Zekerija Cana⁴³ since then, I had a friendship with him.

I went to Skopje with them maybe twice. We met Xhevat Gega and Petro Janura there, they were professors at the time and I remember their houses, they had 4X6 meters libraries, something I didn't get to see in our private houses because we were coming... I was coming from a totally rural zone. And since '74, I went to the *arbëreshë* maybe seven-eight times...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you study them or what?

Sali Cacaj: No, I went for a visit, they had invited me and I went. To be honest then in those villages, that is where the motivation to be oriented in photography came, from the *kulla*, the motivation from our *pleq*, I saw movies with cowboys and such, and I saw some *kanunore* customs and some distinctive dresses of ours which I didn't get to see in any movie. I only got to see them in some Albanian movies later, then at school, the *Kapedan Lleshi* movie,⁴⁴ and two-three other movies where our costumes were used. That was where my inspiration to deal with photography came from.

Then when I came here from Subotica, I had some problems of such nature that then I got totally oriented toward photography. More in order to contribute to the *kulla*, to the figures of *pleq* as creators, I had around fifty thousands slides of that time. There were over ten thousands [slides] of Calabria, *arbëreshë*, various stills, all of them...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you take any training or was it just a hobby of yours?

Sali Cacaj: Photography? I was provided with literature on photography in Zagreb, two-three books that they had. I remember Milan Fiz had [the literature] and I thought within myself he must be like...

³⁹ Mark Krasniqi (1920-2015), ethnographer and writer.

⁴⁰ *Kanunore*, refers to customs in the *Kanun*. See below *Kanun*.

⁴¹ Latif Berisha (1931-1999), Head of LDK branch in Mitrovica. He was killed during the last war.

⁴² Ibrahim Rugova (1944-2006) a writer and journalist, founder and leader of the Democratic League of Kosovo, and President of Kosovo during the war and after until his death.

⁴³ Zekerija Cana (1934-2009), historian.

⁴⁴ Original title, *Kapitan Leši*, [Captain Lleshi], 1960 film on the conflict between communist partisans and Albanian nationalist *ballists* during the Second World War.

because there was a movie, *Kulla e Fizajve*⁴⁵ [The Fizaj's Kulla] and I thought there must be a connection, you know, our deformations are such... and I had such knowledge. Then I went, I followed some photography magazines, and I had maybe five-six books that one had to learn in order to become a photographer. I also asked for the books that were taught at the Academy, the Department of Photography in Zagreb, I went through all of them, I studied them because I had no opportunities to go, and there was not much needed to do for what I wanted.

So, I was in Calabria, I even have two photographs which happened to be in my [pocket] accidentally... of the *arbëreshë* at whose place I was at the time and a memory which was saved for me by my friend, he gave it to me last October when I invited him... I know many *arbëreshë*, back then I thought that it was a big deal, and one of the *arbëreshë* sent me a postcard of that time with the University of Albania and with the *arbëreshe* eagle and a very particular text. {Gives the postcard to the interviewer and tells her that she is free to take it}.

What I want to say is that... I had the inspiration for the national identity from my family, from my grandfather, my maternal uncle. My maternal uncle, the brother of my mother, was of the same generation as Esat Mekuli⁴⁶ and professor Mark [Krasniqi] who went to Albania, then they went to Italy, the Second World War found them in Italy and then he went to England. From England he moved to Australia, where he lived and worked as a doctor and a lawyer. He passed away five years ago. He said that he had two children, whom we never met. He said that one of them was part of NATO, a pilot, and two daughters in France. We don't know their names, neither do we have contacts with them.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you begin with the first shop? I know that you had a photography shop, I guess?

Sali Cacaj: Since then, first I began in '75-'76 in Deçan with *Foto Ulëza* [Ulëza Photo]. Then I went to the military service and I began with *Foto Drini* [Drini Photo] when I came back in '80. In fact, this year is my fortieth anniversary of being engaged in photography with the permit I had in '76, I really have... I was engaged in photography even earlier, in '72, '71, '70, even during middle school, I was constantly engaged in photography.

The reason was a very close friend of mine who was also a relative of mine, his last name was Cacaj and he was a cousin of mine and his father had a camera, but they wouldn't give it to us at that time, but after his father passed away, the camera remained with his mother. We took the camera and it was not difficult, two-three things, we went to the photographer who taught us how to photograph. And I took almost all the middle school photographs. Then from there it was the desire because I didn't mention this... There was mother Raza, whom we had to beg in order to give us the camera when we went on trips as students, it was a Rule 2B camera, I will never forget this, she had it.

⁴⁵ The speaker is referencing an Albanian movie, *Shirat e Vjeshtes* [Autumn Rain]. The movie plot is structured around the house of Fizaj.

⁴⁶ Esad Mekuli (1916-1993), poet and scholar. He was the first president of the Academy of Sciences and Arts of Kosovo. Robert Elsie considered him the father of modern Albanian poetry in Yugoslavia, and his influence in Kosovo remains great.

And this is how photography continued, because I wanted to leave my marks in life, since it didn't work in Foreign Trade. I am a member of *the Shoqata e Artistëve the Piktorëve të Kosovës* [Kosovo Artists and Painters Association]. I am a member of *the Shoqata e Artistëve dhe Piktorëve Gjithëkombëtar* [Nationwide Artists and Painters Association]. I was a member of *the Shoqata e Fotografëve Evropian* [European Photographers Association]. I am a member of the association, academy... of the association, not academy but *Shoqata Akademike Evropiane* [European Academic Association]. It is an association with its headquarters in Brussels. A professor from Gjilan is in charge for our region, he took that position after the war, while the...

I was the official photographer of Miss Europe 1996. I competed in a fair, I have been following photography fairs for 30-40 years now. Maybe I couldn't be part of two-three of them because of the war, and some other times since I was busy with the president.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What of your work did you exhibit?

Sali Cacaj: No, I didn't exhibit my work, but I took care of the technical aspects, of the technology, shape, the way of photographing, then the lenses, cameras, printers, photography machines. I officially had [the Kodak franchise], just like McDonald's, the boy {refers to the cameraman} might know it. There was Kodak Express which gave you [the franchise] according to a standard, a quality, we had to test, everyday in the morning, to test the chemicals in the machines, save it and send it to the person who was in charge in Zagreb, every three months they had to renew you the right to keep [the licence]. Nobody had it in Kosovo but me. Nobody had it in Skopje either, there was one in Belgrade at that time. I mean, I [officially] had the Kodak Express franchise. I have their permission, I had the permission from them. This is it as far as photography goes.

Let me tell you one motive with *arbëreshë* in the Gymnasium of the Lyceum De Rada,⁴⁷ in '74, '75, '76, I was at the *arbëreshë*'s at that time, with *arbëreshë*....She is my fiancée [points the photograph] at that time, my wife. As youngsters, adventurers, we went without being rational in the economic and professional sense, but simply led by the desire to know our people there.

But I used the time there to also take many photographs of the elders and the streets, and I can say that I know at least three-four streets of over 50 *arbëreshë* villages, the ones that are called *arbrishë*, but they don't call it *rruga* [street], but *udha*, *udha* De Rada, *udha* Garibaldi, *udha* Iliria, *udha* Skandërbeg, while in Saint Mitri (San Demetrio Corone), where de Rada was from, the square was named Skandërbeg, the driving school was named Skandërbeg as well as the Radio, the movie theatre, everything was Skandërbeg inspired, literally everything.

I participated in some *arbëreshe* public events, which usually take place in the fall. Some of them in the spring at Easter time as well. The costumes are extraordinary and I feel very bad that they [the photographs] were burned in my house and I can freely say that I had no desire to live anymore, maybe I am wrong but my life felt like nothing because I consider that my identity was burned because I had photographs of an artistic, but also documentary level. I was there four times and

⁴⁷ Geronimo de Rada (1814-1903), an Italian writer of Albanian descent, *arbëreshë*, was a prominent figure in the nineteenth century Albanian National Awakening Movement (Rilindja)

in....So, *Arvanitas*⁴⁸ were my inspiration. I took many photographs there, I personally knew Aristio Kola. I lost everything...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What about the photographs of the Reconciliation Movement?

Sali Cacaj: No, I have no photographs of the Reconciliation Movement and the violence anymore. I took photographs of the Reconciliation Movement since the very first day until Verrat e Llukës.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you become an activist for human rights?

Sali Cacaj: Human rights, it was my own will and desire, because in the '90s, at the beginning, after the announcement of the *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës*,⁴⁹ of the founding of the *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës*, I was active with President Rugova since the very first day, I told you that I met him in '74-'75, we had meetings with *arbëreshë*, we met each-other. It is important that the president was part of the Writers Colony that was held in Deçan where writers and artists met.

That is where I mostly met him, he was even at my house twice. We had dinner, then we sent him at night, we had no car, there were two kilometers from down to up and at night, at around 10pm in the summer, 11pm, we sent him to his hotel together with the son of my paternal uncle. We accompanied him in order not to leave him alone. The second time we sent him with a neighbor, we took his car and sent him because he didn't want to go there on foot. He didn't like cornbread, he didn't prefer it. We were in constant contacts with the president, and we had very good relations with Bardhyl Çausi. He left his bees at my house for some period of time, he is a family friend. I also knew professor Mark, especially since the '90s in the Council for Human Rights⁵⁰ as I told you, when a beating from the police happened, they beat my cousins Idriz Caca and some others, and my brother photographed them quickly, then I photographed them as well, because my brother was younger, but however he photographed them very quickly. Then those photographs went viral, because photography was important because of its visual side. Then we took photographs, maybe, maybe over ten thousands shots only about the violence until close to the war. I have nothing from the war.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do they [The Council] have any copy that has remained? I mean the photographs that were used for documentation?

Sali Cacaj: We mainly worked in the Council for Human Rights, it could sound unbelievable to someone, but I took over three-four hundred photographs in ten years, five thousands, four thousands, because I had my own laboratory and I didn't hesitate to do it. I developed them on my own. I closed the shop. And then I worked from the moment I closed the curtains of the shop until late at night, because I also had some employees but I didn't want to force anyone, and I always did them

⁴⁸ *Arvanites* are a bilingual population group in Greece who traditionally speak Arvanitika, a dialect of the Albanian language along with Greek.

⁴⁹ *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* - 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.

⁵⁰ The full name of this organization is Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedom. KMLDNJ is the Albanian acronym.

on my own except two-three times, I also brought them to Pristina on my own. Then I had a part of the car just like a bunker, it's like the jewelers had made it like that, with the purpose of hiding things, and a guy taught me how to put them under the [car] seat, and there were two-three hundred photographs. We put the bobbins of the car sponge and it seemed like there was nothing there when somebody looked at it. Osman Cacaj, an activist, accompanied me many times.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What were the cases that you documented?

Sali Cacaj: Violence, beatings. I have some...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Of the police?

Sali Cacaj: Yes, of the police. I have some, I have some [photographs] at home, but I don't have most of them because I had the negative [films] at home. Everything that wasn't at home survived, as for the others, I don't know whether they were burned or they took them. Because the police stayed at my house for over two-three weeks, then they left and they burned the house, and maybe they burned the photographs as well. The house is still burned.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Which were the places you [photographed] mostly, in the Peja region, all around Kosovo?

Sali Cacaj: No, no, I was all around Kosovo. I was there when Ylfete Humolli⁵¹ was [killed], I also was in Drenica as well as in Mitrovica, I was in...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you be more detailed about the cases, because it's good to have them...

Sali Cacaj: The cases... the cases are terrible. One of the most difficult cases was the rape of Elizabeta Katanolli in Peja. It was one of the case where I couldn't hold myself, that case was different from the other ones. It looks like when women are touched, one finds it more difficult to hold themselves, I mean, to bear it. My tears flew and I couldn't photograph her in the hospital.

We photographed many people in the hospital, thanks to doctor Mahir Morins and his team, as well as some nurses who were there because they were connected to each-other. Sabrije Rrustaj was another case in the school protests, whose ear was totally removed by a truncheon, Samile Popovci and some others, if you only saw their faces... those photographs are terrible. The newspapers *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *Der Spiegel*, and *The Times* had them, as well as the Turkish *Hürriyet*, they all had those photographs on their first pages. Of course they took them from me, we gave them to them because I was a member of the Council for Human Rights in Pristina as well, and we gave the photographs to them.

I had, we had a priority because we didn't need money to develop the photographs, because I did that, I had a very good machine and it could develop one thousands and five hundred photographs in one hour. The machines were big back then, with big capacities so I can say that we spread over five

⁵¹ Ylfete Humolli was 16 when she was killed by the police during a peaceful demonstration held near Podujevo in February 1990.

hundred thousands photographs in ten years, because there was no scanning nor internet back then, we gave them to the delegation, two thousands, three thousands, one thousands, five hundred, sometimes more, sometimes less.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How would you define photography, as documentary or more?

Sali Cacaj: Me? No, it's documentary, there is no other meaning. There was the other specific case, it was on the first page of *La Repubblica*, if I am not mistaken, of Isuf Rizi, because I might confuse it now. There was Zonol Lushaj of the village of Gjonaj in the Has region who worked in a bakery for over 20 years in Belgrade, and he gave pie and bread and the whole breakfast, he fed them for 24 years, and in a sense just like a raven, as the people's saying goes, "No matter how much you feed the raven, it will rip your eyes off either way." And they ripped his eyes off, I have the photographs, I was also at his funeral. It is a unique case, the two teachers who were killed in the village of Uqsh.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did this all happen during the '90s?

Sali Cacaj: No, no they are a little... '90, '92, '93, '94 and a little later, these things vanished with time, with some exceptions. But there was a peculiarity back then, that no matter where a little beating happened, we felt it as a thorn in our body. But after the war, people's hearts became, victims unfortunately became numbers and nothing else. There was the case of the teachers, we went to the village of Uqsh together with Zenun Çela and Bajram Kelmendi, as well as Ymer Jaka and Pajazit Nushi, we went to the village of Gjonaj of the Hai Region, Zonol Lushaj.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What cases?

Sali Cacaj: The case of the baker from Belgrade. The process of photographing it was terrible. We also photographed some soldiers who returned dead in coffins,⁵² there was Selman Meta of the municipality of Peja, I don't remember the village at the moment. It was peculiar that I didn't realize it until the moment when I had to face it that there were very difficult cases, that it was very difficult to see beaten and raped and mistreated people in such a cruel way. There were, how to say, easier cases, they were not easy but as far as physical injuries go, they were a little easier...

The soldier, I remember Selman Meta, because I have memorized hundreds of them. He was in his uniform, tied, just the way they come in coffins, we took his corpse out of the coffin and put it in the yard behind the hay, he had an unbearable scent, trust me, I had to get close to him two-three times in order to take his belt off, then I had to get farther in order to breathe. Then, I returned, I was the one who did it mostly. I can say that I have turned over hundreds of people with my own hands. That was a bit special because he was a little... the corpse had stayed for too long, it had swollen and when I undressed him, because I had to undress him in order to photograph his whole body, like this and like this {shows the sides with his hands}. I accept reality, his leg was black and the skin broke, I thought, I thought that he was wearing leggings. I thought he was wearing them because of the cold winter

⁵² Contextual: Reference to a wave of alleged suicides of Albanian conscripts in 1990, which were never investigated and the truth about the circumstances of their death was denied to the families.

weather, only later did I realize that the skin broke. You know, very difficult.

Then the last ones just before the war in the village of Sllup, Glllogjan, Sllupqe, twelve, thirteen people in the village of Glllogjan, all of them together, because people couldn't stand it anymore, it was difficult. People, my father and I were strong in cases of misfortune, my brother died on a hill, he fell from a rock, and nobody saw a tear in my father's eyes. We are strong, but such cases sometimes... it was more difficult for me in the beginning, a lot more difficult because I had to photograph them, my eyes would fill with tears, I felt pity, I was very emotional. Then later somehow I perceived it as my task which I had to do and I began to adapt, I did it differently.

And the case in the village of Sllup, there were 13-14 people, one of them worked in television, there were two-three teachers. We had to take them out of the trunk, there were some... some plastic bags just like the ones that are used for suits, they had their numbers and we had to open them. There were many people from the Hadërgjonaj family, they had ripped the eye off of Selman, the worker of the television, there were massacres of every kind.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you find out about these cases through the Council or... did they invite you?

Sali Cacaj: No, in fact I knew them mostly because they were from my region, everybody would come to me also when the police [conducted] raids, because I was also a member of the Council, and I went to most of the cases alone. I took two people with me twice, but it was difficult with them because I saw that it was hard for them until they got used to it, so I went there on my own mostly. There were cases when my relatives accompanied me and so on, but the Council also told me from a distance when something happened in Mitrovica or Kaçanik. I don't remember the name, Zekerija Cana called me once and we went at around 1 or 2 am with a taxi driver whose name I don't remember at the moment. They found a dead person. The moon shone just as if it was the sun and the dog, when we went to the place, the dog had taken the hand and I was younger at the time because it's been twenty-six years since those cases. And it took us [a run of] two-three hundred meters to remove the hand from the dog and Zekerija couldn't run, the taxi driver ran faster than I because he was even younger...

And I mean, there are many cases, very difficult ones, and the one in the village of Glllogjan when the protest took place... the protest in which the police shot Agron Mehmeti and Him Haradinaj, and another one, when the police killed the three of them right away. Hima was killed behind the school and they told us that another one is killed somewhere else. We looked for them, we took the other ones and we didn't find the last one. We went with the journalist Curr Mazreki, Emon Selmanaj, we went with Osman Cacaj as well. We looked for him in the pool of Radoniq but we couldn't find him. They told us that Nuhi Bytyqi, Nuhi Bytyqi knows... Nuhi Bytyqi is a journalist.

Nuhi was a son-in-law in the village of Glllogjan and he was more connected to the case, and I called him through a satellite telephone, I said, "Oh Nuhi, we have been at the Radoniq pool all day long, there is nothing there." "No, *bre*,⁵³" he said, "Sali, look for him twenty meters down the school of

⁵³ Colloquial: used to emphasize the sentence, it expresses strong emotion. *More* adds emphasis, like *bre*, similar to the English *bro*, brother.

Glllogjan.” We found him when we went there. He had two bombs and one kalashnikov with him, he was injured.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In his body?

Sali Cacaj: Yes, yes, he had the bombs and the kalashnikov as a soldier that he was, a UÇK⁵⁴ soldier without the uniform.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did this happen very late?

Sali Cacaj: As a more specific case. And I know that poor him, he had died, he had crawled a little and died. We saw that he died because of blood loss and nobody could help him, because it had happened two-three days earlier and you know, because the injury was here and here, nothing more. There were various cases.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you get in touch with people from the Blood Feuds Reconciliation Movement?

Sali Cacaj: With people from the Blood Feuds Reconciliation Movement, I started to tell you earlier, I am sorry for the digression, Nimon Alimusaj, he was a professor in the gymnasium with some of his students. Nimon came to my shop, which was not right on the street side, but it was a little deeper and we knew Nimon personally from his son, he was also part of the *Shoqëria Shpresa* [Association Hope] where I was an organizer, and his brother Ilir was my geography teacher, a teacher in the elementary school and he said, “It would be good if you came to take photographs and help,” because he said, “You are good at organizing, you have been an organizer before and you were an organizer of the soccer matches where you played, as well as in the *Shoqëria Shpresa*,” he said, “And I believe you could help us a lot when the Blood Feuds Reconciliations start.” I said, “Yes, I am available at any time.”

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When did this happen?

Sali Cacaj: This happened in the early ‘90s.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you have any date?

Sali Cacaj: If I am not mistaken, it was February, the beginning of February, something like that.

Part Two

Sali Cacaj: And then we met Niman who said, “We have to meet someone there.” There was Hava Shala, Flamur Gashi, Myrvete Dreshaj, Zoge Shala, Adem Grabovci, Rexhep Kelmendi, Lulzim Dreshaj, Ibrahim Kastrati and I guess two or three others, Adem’s brother and I don’t know who else from the students was there. And some of us met Nimon, and I said, “The entire shop is available for you.” We

⁵⁴ *Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës*, Kosovo Liberation Army.

opened it in order for people who wanted to notify us about a feud to come there and bring [the names] on a piece of paper. They mainly brought them to my shop, but they also gave the papers to other people or other activists. People in need who were locked or in feuds with their relatives or other people, of course they needed to be set free and reconcile because the tradition exists that they are only allowed to move under *besa*.⁵⁵

And this is how we gathered and coordinated, the first case was when we went to Isa Leka's in the village of Lumbardh, to Isa Leka's in the village of Lumbardh, first there was no way he would accept. Then we talked to him with great difficulty. And from there then with Nimon, Nimon said in the beginning, "We have the Boçolli family as well," when he came to me. The first reconciliation that was done was the one of the Boçolli family, not the first blood that was reconciled, because they were reciprocally damaged. My sister was married to someone from the Boçolli family, she got married two-three years before, one side of the Boçolli family were my family friends, Idriz Boçolli. Idriz and Fazli Boçolli, Idriz was the first who killed the one [on the other side of the family].

Erëmirë Krasniqi: The same family, in which they killed each-other?

Sali Cacaj: Among themselves, and regardless, as they told us, he asked to be spared, to be spared according to the tradition, when you are caught [and your family has already asked for forgiveness] you ought to be spared and handed over [to his family], it should not be... they were supposed to forgive the boy. But he was, of course his brother was killed, no, his son, and then he killed him as well. It is a very interesting example, I mean, both leaders of the families killed each other's sons. Both of them went to prison where they were sentenced with twelve years or something, and both of them spent three-four hundred thousands Deutsche Marks of that time for the lawyer, because the ruling power of that time exploited them.

Both of them were leaders of the house and very skilful, very skilful and authoritative.

The reason was that Nimon knew me as a photographer and as an activist who was ready for national, human actions, and this is the first case where I had an influence. We were with Niman at that house until late at night.

From there then, people notified us about enmities time after time, as I told you. We locked the door twice a week with the Reconciliation group and some had more activities while some others had less, the tasks were divided among us and we went. I had a car at that time, they had no car and I didn't hesitate about anything material, I mean the car, the fuel, the food, we went all around together with Hava, Adem, there was also Nasim Haradinaj. The photographs show that there was also... because to be honest I didn't know all of them in the beginning, how was I supposed to know who was this or that, but I knew them later. So when they came on Fridays, they usually slept at our place sometimes, and on Saturdays they went to finish [the reconciliation] together with professor Anton, Mark Krasniqi, Azem Shkreli, Bajram Kelmendi, Adem Bajri, Nimon as authoritative, intellectuals, as public figures,

⁵⁵ 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. In this context, it means a guaranteed truce.

there was a period.... Esat Stavileci joined us in two-three cases as well as Ali Aliu, later on the *hoxha*⁵⁶ of Strelc joined, there was the general maxim... all the structures later, then in the public gatherings in the village of Smolica...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Is this the first one?

Sali Cacaj: No, it was not the first, only Anton and Mark were in the first one, the one you just looked at is the first reconciliation.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes, I am talking about public gatherings?

Sali Cacaj: Public gatherings, there were some of them if I am not mistaken, the last one was the one at Verrat e Llukës. It was my idea for the gathering at Verrat e Llukës, and I was officially part of the organization of the public gathering at Verrat e Llukës. Precisely there.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you organize it?

Sali Cacaj: The idea came after the gatherings in the village of Smolica, after the gatherings in the village of Vojnik in Drenica, then some other gatherings took place in Rugova as well, the photographs from the gatherings in Drenica and Smolica are public, public gatherings took place in Rugova as well, now almost all of those were done. I, as a *deçanas*, Deçan is one kilometer and a half far from Lluka. My paternal uncle's house was in Isniq, and when I went there as a child with my mother, that part connects, you have to go through Verrat e Llukës and my grandfather and the old ladies told us, my mother, "The first assembly where people reconciled took place here," my grandfather was present there as well. And then...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was this the assembly of Haxhi Zeka?⁵⁷

Sali Cacaj: No, no... no, no, that was the assembly of reconciliation, because the League of Prizren⁵⁸ and Peja⁵⁹ have other meanings. This was for reconciliation, and it took place earlier, I don't exactly know the date, I guess, I guess... I am not sure, I don't want to mistake the date.

It is already known that back then there were the representative of the *fise*,⁶⁰ the representatives of

⁵⁶ Local Muslim clergy, mullah, muezzin.

⁵⁷ 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.

⁵⁸ The 1878 Albanian Alliance that fought against border changes decided at the Congress of Berlin by the Great Powers. The League demanded autonomy from the Ottoman Empire. The building where the Albanian leaders made their *besa* (sworn alliance) is on the river, upstream from the center of town. It is now a museum. The current building is a reconstruction of the original one, which Serbian troops burned down in 1999.

⁵⁹ 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.

⁶⁰ *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

the *fise* or the *Bajraktarë*⁶¹ or *Flamurtarë*⁶² how they are called in Albanian, and the assembly of reconciliation took place at Verrat e LLukës, people reconciled because they realized the Serbian occupiers wanted to assimilate the nation, they reconciled in order to remove the wound because the wound was, I mean, the murders were an inner cancer for us. But there is an important factor, in order to get back to the topic, let me not forget that reconciliations, during reconciliations we didn't ask them to forgive the murder, or to the one who committed the crime. Nobody asked them to forgive the blood to them, they were asked to forgive the blood to Kosovo, to Kosovo youth and to the Kosovo people. I mean it was a holy bravery, to Kosovo, to Kosovo youth, to the Kosovo people. "You can see the situation we've come to, you don't need to kill each-other, others are trying to assimilate and chase us from here, forgiving the blood to Kosovo and not having the need to save our backs from each-other is our only way of surviving."

This was the maxim, I know that it was like this from the very first days, there are footages of some cases, Rexhë Kelmendi recorded them, he is the brother of Bajram Kelmendi, I can provide you with his number, he recorded in some cases, the television recorded two-three cases as well, while Rexha recorded time after time. I didn't deal with recording, only with photography.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us in a more detailed way about how you organized the gathering at Verrat e LLukës?

Sali Cacaj: And I went, then I came to President Rugova, I opened the topic, I said, "President," he asked, "How are the reconciliations going?" And I told him, and I said, "I came here to discuss a topic with you, I've been thinking about organizing a more massive gathering at Verrat e LLukës," I said, "Since it's somewhere around there. Reconciliations were initiated in that part in the village of Lumbardh and Raushiq, that part," I said, "I would like to connect it with the old symbol, which is called The Assembly of Reconciliations at Verrat e LLukës." The President knew about it. The President said, "That is a very good thought of yours," he said, "Talk to Zekerija Cana." Then I called Zekerija Cana, back then there were fix telephones, and I went to his house to look for him two times, he wasn't there, then I found him and talked to him, we came to the President whom we talked to and whom we took the confirmation from, because back then we thought that we might do some mistake, you know, because of course...

And then we went to Deçan, where it was organized back then. Back then it was, we had founded the LDK. The LDK was already founded in Deçan the way former local communities were at the time, like that. And during a meeting... close to the house where I lived in Deçan was the house of Sali Rrusta, there was Ali Lami then Hysen Aliaj Demukaj, we held the meetings in their *soba*, in their *oda*. Then it was I, as well as Binak Aliqki who was the leader, Emrush Loka was the secretary, there are also seven or eight others who are still alive, it's Emrush, Ali, me, who else? There are two or three more, there is a guy from the village of Gramaqel, there is Beqir Berisha who is still alive, all of them are architects,

⁶¹ Local military leader, literally standard-bearer, from the Turkish *bajrak*, standard. When the Ottomans began to enlist Albanian subjects for their army they chose brave representatives of the tribe to lead the recruits and they called them *bajraktar*.

⁶² From *flamur*, flag, see *bajrak*.

Albanian Language teachers, members of the leadership. Binak passed away, the leader, and I told him, "I have been thinking about organizing a reconciliation assembly at Verrat e Llukës." They were not engaged in reconciliations, I was.

But I, as one of the founders of the Deçan branch of the *LDK*, I was in that group, the *LDK* was founded at my house. The pre-preparation was done and the assembly was announced at my cousin's restaurant. Then, Binak said, "You know better about these things, we are not engaged, but it is a good thing." Binak said right away, "I have a proposal," he said, "Let Salih become the leader then." I said, "Let somebody else become the leader because I have other occupations," he said, "No, no we don't know, we are not engaged in those things." And that is when I was named as the leader and they told me, "Select some other members," I selected around ten members there right away, then the circle expanded and we became 27 or 28.

This is how we made the preparations, we set May 1st as the date, we set May 1st as the date. The place was known, we went, we prepared the place, we cleaned it because there were many stones, people from the village cleaned it more. Then they mobilized, they were so inspired, we had such support from that people that we could have even built a 400 story building only by using the stones that they brought, over three-four hundred people visited that area everyday. Then it was divided, there were four architects in charge of the stage, they borrowed the planks somewhere, then the electricity, we took a generator, the canal was near.

We divided tasks among ourselves in the organizations, Ramadan Tahiraj with his group of doctors were in charge of healthcare, they created two points of first aid in case of need, there was the stage place which the architects were in charge of, the architects were also in charge of the banners, there were around one hundred caretakers, the fields were ready, people were ready to give their cars. Over one hundred families were ready to shelter people who came from far away, to give them food when the gathering was done, not to let them leave right away, because of the fear of the possible mistreatments that could happen.

One guy proposed, because there were many ideas there, one guy proposed to take the doves, he had doves, I mean, and he wanted to take the doves and to set as many doves free as many bloods were forgiven, and we approved it. We did the organization, we did the organization at the house of my father's paternal uncle one night earlier, that was connected to the area near there. Because usually...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How much time did you need to prepare?

Sali Cacaj: Around two weeks, yes, yes we needed around two weeks. We did the organization in his *soba*, there was Isuf Rexha who helped us as well...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did all this event go?

Sali Cacaj: The event went... it was a miracle, people say that there were half million of people. There were, there were no incidents, except the police, that was the time when Zekerija Cana confronted the police, he confronted them physically as well. They mistreated some people from the Council for Human Rights, I've forgotten now to be honest, because it's been 26 years, I had the list of how many

people were mistreated at that time in Deçan, as well as in the *rreth* where we all were. But, we put the banners at night, “Welcome!” And we also put the signs that directed people to the place, because people didn’t know the way, first they had to come to Deçan, because there were other ways that led there from the villages of Isniq, Prapaqan, Lluka, from Gjakova, there were some other alternative routes. But people participated in a massive way and according to the media, as I told you, I can freely say that around half million of people participated and if I am not mistaken, around one hundred bloods were forgiven that day.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you organize them or were there people who showed up and forgave the blood during the gathering?

Sali Cacaj: No, no, they were prepared previously, but six or seven other people showed up, people out of emotion, out of the glory of the assembly, all the people who were there worked to organize, be it with or without authorization, everything in Kosovo at that time worked as a single body, because people were ready to help you with a house, a car and even with their lives in case you wanted to do something, they were ready to help you with everything.

Unfortunately, there is no such unity nowadays, there is no need for it, but there is a need for it in the sense of harmony and civilization, how to say. The cases were prepared previously, but I guess six cases or more than ten were forgiven without being prepared previously, however, it is not hard, I can provide you with the right number from the reconciliation book because I am not prepared now the way I should with numbers. And as for the cases, when we went there we told them that, “A central event will take place, where not only people from Kosovo will participate...” there were people from Presheva, Macedonia, Ulcinj, and from all around, to be honest. People from outside Kosovo came and joined, people came, sometimes there were, they told us that, “They came with certain intentions and so on,” we didn’t care about such things because we were hiding nothing, those were reconciliations and that was it, we were there for the reconciliation of our people, to remove a bad mark, to be free of that obligation, in fact of that tragedy that had happened to the people. It was not done for the harm of anyone, it was done for our own good.

Great are those who lifted themselves over the tragedy that happened to them, because forgiving is not easy, it is not easy to forgive the blood of your child, of your son, it’s not easy to forgive the blood of your only son, of your only brother, of your only paternal uncle with no children, of the only person. Because, professor Anton had an influence with his wisdom, with his softness and his charisma or his aura, he had a positive impact.

Azem [Shkreli] had a very deep logic, he didn’t have a very loud voice like Ramiz [Kelmendi], but he had a logic, he had a philosophy with which he managed to bring people to concluding their act only by using three-four words, like this. Professor Mark, in his own way as well, because he came more when things were done, he didn’t enter the *oda* and expecting he will say, “Yes, I forgive it,” but we went, we prepared the cases. “You will not forgive,” we said, “Alright, you will not forgive, but come to the *oda*, sit with other men and say in front of them, ‘I will not forgive.’” Then they did their work, when there were intellectuals they talked to them about the general interest, the need to liberate from that harm. The main key was that nobody asked them to forgive the blood to the murderer or to

the one who had committed the crime, they were asked to forgive it to Kosovo, to Kosovo youth and Kosovo people.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did you tell them that blood feud is, what phenomenon was it, how did you justify it?

Sali Cacaj: Feuds are a tradition, how to say Erëmirë, according to many people they were not with us before, they say that they came to us after the time of Turkey. But, it cannot be true primarily, I am talking primarily, because the *Kanun*⁶³ came before the time of Turkey. But I know that our *pleq* said that it only happened that people killed each-other behind their back at the time when people came from Kursumlija and Niš, when they moved.⁶⁴ Because it never happened before that someone was killed behind their back. Because the traditions were, you must've read or heard about them, there was a code, a code to protect the honor, and there were some rules that there was no way you were allowed to avenge the blood on a child, you were not allowed to avenge the blood on women, old or young ladies. You were not allowed to avenge the blood on very old men, I mean, it was, how to say, a generous side at that time. They avenged the blood... a skilful man, when he was on his own and when they were facing each-other, not in that sense, but later something happened and people tell that they did it secretly, and so on...

Actually, according to the tradition, hidden blood [taken in an ambush] is not avenged, because the blood is avenged in the sense elders tell it, in order to protect dignity and honor. They called the person by their name and said, "I want to kill you because of this or that," and they did it quickly, finished the thing, didn't keep it hidden, they fired the gun in case they did it using a gun and said, "I avenged the blood of my father, grandfather, maternal uncle or someone else." I mean, it was public because there were some not good methods for those who were in enmity, for those whose relative was killed, there were some methods of denigrating their personality in case they didn't avenge the blood. There were cases when they were given coffee in a mocking way or how to say, provocative way, I don't know how to give an example, when they went to men's *oda*, they were like, "Is it him?" They didn't allow him to sit on the deserved spot, "Go sit there a little lower," implying that he was not brave enough to take revenge or avenge the blood.

I consider that these methods were not good in that respect, but I consider that they belong to the past now. I think that now there is the law, it should've been eradicated by the law, there is no more blood feuds. And it should be that way, that people get sentenced a lot more for blood feuds in order to avoid them because...But in some sense, maybe they had their positive influence after the war, I am talking about the Dukagjin region where I belong, because if it wasn't for the forgiving, if you escaped the law, you also escaped the evidence and the facts to present in court...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us about the LDK Council in the Reconciliation, what was its role, can

⁶³ *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.

⁶⁴ The speaker refers to the forced migration of the Albanian population from Sandjak and Niš, that became incorporated respectively into the Principality of Montenegro and the Principality of Serbia in 1878.

you tell us more concretely about it?

Sali Cacaj: People try to give it different directions now, but I can responsibly say that everything breathed and everything that happened, did so through the *LDK* and with the *LDK*. Such were the actions and the functions of the state. From... the branch of the *LDK* had its sub-branches which were active, and we covered everything that happened. One beating, one mistreatment, when a policeman walked around or came to our house, we had the Commission for Information which I was part of the Deçani branch, and the Leadership of the Commission for Information went through the *LDK*, and the mistreatment [cases], as well as the Council, I was part of the Central Council of Human Rights myself. And when we were dividing the tasks for this part, the president told me, “Sali, you should deal more with the Council of [Human] Rights and the skills that you have,” and together with them I participated in tens of meetings of the Central Leadership, without being part of the Central Leadership, because of the relations, not family relations, because being an activist was not a privilege, but a responsibility of its kind, right? So, in my opinion, I am saying with the greatest objectivity that as much as I could see and if you analyze it, everything breathes with the *LDK* and through the *LDK*.

President Rugova was the most informed person about everything that happened, starting from the delegates who declared the Independence of Kosovo [1990] in consultations with President Rugova, to the beatings and murders. But he had his subtleties that he showed on the media on Fridays, he selected what he had to say, I don't want to interfere whether they were priorities or not. But, back then the three percent⁶⁵ functioned through the *LDK* as well as the education and the schools and everything else. So, nobody should feel, we are having a friendly conversation, nobody should feel bad about why the *LDK* of that time was that way, because it was a guarantee [for peace] and there was no other.

The parallel state, there was no parallel state *de facto*, but we had it through the *LDK*, it was governed as a parallel state. The government did its work, the police union did its work, the Council for Finances did its work, but nothing was divided at that time, how to say, everything functioned as a single body. The Government as well as the [political] subjects, there was the *PDSH*⁶⁶ as well as the Social Democrats and they were part of Kosovo state. We were part of them and they were part of us.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did Rugova go to the reconciliations?

Sali Cacaj: No, no, he didn't go to the reconciliations.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was he involved then?

Sali Cacaj: But, I was notified about everything, I was part of the Council, and people notified the Council mainly. Even though in the eyes of the internationals it was not good to be part of the Council

⁶⁵ 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.

⁶⁶ *Partia Demokratike Shqiptare*, Albanian Democratic Party.

and political activities, because they looked at us the way we look at the people of the ruling power and the ones of the opposition, or political groups, the political parties among each-other.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Let's talk about the political situation at the time of the reconciliations, the curfew, how did these affect the organization of these gatherings?

Sali Cacaj: Listen, back then we were... first our media gave a special importance to it, but the television of Kosovo was closed very soon. Then the only information was through [Radio] Zagreb, people stayed sleepless, it had an extraordinary echo, the information was transmitted through telephones very easily. Everybody was informed in case someone was beaten or mistreated, because we had the Council for Human Rights and the representatives of the Council for Human Rights in each Municipality center and in each local community, so in fact, in fact there was a representative of the commission of information in every village as well, so that functioned very well. We had no tradition, we were not prepared in a professional way to set the priorities. I am saying, I had it for the mistreatments {shows the form with hands}, "The case," name, last name, the case, the case here, here, here, this place, this time, the motive, what for? For guns, for permission, beaten and mistreated for this.

Usually in Peja when I was active in the shop, there was a center that was more active than all the others, because people came to the shop, but I also went to their houses. And I had... there was Neshat Asllani as well, he had his private clinic at that time, close to the *Dukagjini* printing house. And we went to him, he would give us the medical report of the scale of the injury, he wrote it in Latin, and together with them brought it to my shop. And then I put it together with the report and brought it to Pristina as a member of the Council, but I always left a copy of it in the sub-Council of the Human Rights in Peja. Then, in case the person was from Deçan, then we left a copy of the report in Deçan, in case the person was from Istog, we did so in Istog, for the ones coming from Klina, we left a copy in Klina and so on. So, in case any delegation came from abroad, it happened that they came to Peja, we showed them the materials, this is how it functioned.

As far as the situation goes, it was electrifying for people, just like it happens nowadays during actual events, such as the World Championship of Sports, where Albania competed as well, each person, each family... now, the Championship had another meaning, but people were extremely sensitized, even the old man who could barely move as well as the shepherd in the mountains and the one in the fields as well as the ordinary workers and intellectuals, all of them were... I don't know how to say, they functioned as a single body to give information, they expressed their pain for everything that happened. It was a strength, an energy of the people, and when it is of the people, it is of God, as the old people's saying goes, "*Vox populi, vox dei.*"

So, our media, intellectuals, journalists, shepherds, ordinary workers, housewives, pupils, students gave an extraordinary contribution just like a single body. I consider it the result of everybody's work, just like the body works as a totality, it's not only the eyes or the hands, but it's each part of the body that does its own function in a perfect way in order for the organization to turn out successful so that we could live, we could keep our lives alive, I am saying in that sense. Zagreb gave an extraordinary contribution because we were notified about what was happening. Also the various delegations

coming from abroad, the Council of Human Rights, Sara Duran visited the municipality of Novosella as well as two other places of that municipality at that time. Then a Belgian Senator, Will Keppers who was fascinated and impressed, how to say, of the way it worked. He even said that, “The courts and all the state procedures are not this powerfully functional in our country,” that is, even photographed. I am saying, there were wives who forgave their husband’s bloods, mothers who forgave their son’s blood because her husband was not alive. I mean, I don’t know a category that was not included in the reconciliations, including violence and mistreatments.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you use these as arguments when you reconciled people, all the violence that was used against Kosovo people?

Sali Cacaj: We never showed violence as an argument with photos, but everybody was informed by the press about it...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: No, no, no, I mean, when you went to reconciliations in the *oda*, I mean the violence that was used by Serbia? Did you inform the people?

Sali Cacaj: Yes, it was evident. Actually, when we gathered there, there was no person, there were around ten or twenty people in a room, and at least half of them had already heard or read from the media about what had happened. We often said, “Did you see what happened last night?” Sometimes they wanted to be informed in more details. And that is, that was a factor as well, yes. To be honest, the main reason was [to forgive it] for Kosovo, for Kosovo youth and Kosovo people. This was the maxim that gave optimal results. We had moments when we reminded them of what happened, in order to remind them that it could happen to us there as well, but not so much, I mean we didn’t open those topics, they didn’t and I didn’t. I was not directly... I was there from the very first day, when I prepared the case of the first blood, at my sister’s family, at Idriz Boçolli. Together with Niman, then we went to Idriz’s, whose family was brought together with the other family, here’s the photographs {refers to the photographs he has with him}.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you have any case that you would like to tell us, that was interesting, that you remember?

Sali Cacaj:... There were moments when we told them, “Go out, discuss it,” professor Anton told them, “Discuss it with the family, anything you cannot say to us, we will be waiting for you here even after one week, two weeks, but this thing needs to be done.” There were cases when the person was not against forgiving in front of us, they said, “Yes, we should forgive.” But another would say to him, “You should go and wear the *kule!*” The *kule* are old women’s trousers, you know, how to say, but maybe this can be justified because he was his brother, and the other one was his father. So, the one who understands everything, forgives everything. Maybe there was one reason that pushed him to say it, because he couldn’t handle forgiving the blood to the one who killed his brother, because it is not easy. How to say, I wish I was not in their skin, only they do know, they couldn’t experience sleep as sleep nor happiness as happiness in their lives, it is difficult, it is difficult.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When did reconciliations come to their end, I mean when did the organization of

the gatherings come to its end?

Sali Cacaj: I said one thing, I only talked about the main part that was, how to say, the core one. The echo of blood feuds reconciliations then was spread in every municipality where groups of blood feuds reconciliations were created and they did their function all around Kosovo, they even went to Plava, Gucia, Tuz and the Ulqin region. Then they went to Preseva, Bujanovc, Tetova, Kumanova, Dibra. There were such echoes everywhere, even abroad, in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, America and everywhere, there was an indescribable mobilization. Such was the situation, the core moment to solidarize with an issue that was considered more national than everything else, because it was also human as everything else, it helped people to individually liberate themselves from the responsibilities or the case, they were either killed or had killed. It was more national, more about the general interest, I mean, I might be wrong when I call it national, but the cases that occurred were within our nation. I mean, when it occurs so often, then it's nationwide or national. I am saying national because it only occurred to us, Albanians, because it didn't happen that we be asked for help to reconcile the Turkish or Serbian minority.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were there interreligious cases, there must've been, but what about the interethnic ones?

Sali Cacaj: Interethnic, no, no, I don't remember at the moment, interethnic, no, there were cases where we confronted the police, nothing of the sort [you're mentioning]. At the time of the former ruling power, with them there was no point to reconcile, because the ruling power created towards the state... we had no...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I have read in an article in the 90's *Rilindja*,⁶⁷ that a Serbian family was reconciled with an Albanian one during reconciliations, that is why I asked, were there any cases?

Sali Cacaj: I don't concretely remember at the moment, I remember something, but somehow blurry, because it's been 26 years. But mainly, I am saying it's... I talked about what I witnessed. All of this together with the echo of reconciliations made the people unite, gather and look towards the general interest and function as a single body. Then all the '90s ended with the war are a result of it. So the echo of the Blood Feuds Reconciliations was the main uniting factor of the people, the uniting factor among brothers, villagers, people from the same region, people from the same religion who had conflicts with each other. We had religious cases, here and there among Albanians, but those cases were forgiven as well.

[The video interview was cut]

Sali Cacaj:... I was not interested in doing exhibitions, I felt bad about doing them in the midst of our tragedy, in that cycle of mistreatments, I felt bad doing exhibitions out of people's violence, doing a personal promotion, I didn't feel good.

⁶⁷ *Rilindja*, the first newspaper in Albanian language in Yugoslavia, initially printed in 1945 as a weekly newspaper.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you create a visual language of these events?

Sali Cacaj: Yes, I did it. There were photographs that were taken in the region, but usually the highest percentage of the photographs in wartime, but also of the mistreatments, were mine, inside and outside the *kulla*. A part of them that were in the shop survived, some friends of mine had removed them and saved them. A priest from Peja hid them underground, those are the ones that survived. I mean, photos of reconciliations, of mistreatments, a part of the *kulla*, a part of the photographs of *kulla* were destroyed, I no longer have photographs of *arbëreshë* and *arvanitas*. I have some photographs that were taken after the war as well as some that were taken before the war, the ones that were mixed with some negative films and so on, and I also have the activities of the LDK President that were taken after the war. I also have photographs of the Assembly of PSHDK and of the Social Democrat as well as two meetings of the union, two-three meetings before the war, the press conference that was held every Friday.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Are you still a member of LDK?

Sali Cacaj: No, I am a passive part, groups are doing their work of course, and of course they are selecting the players in their own favor. I was a member of the leadership at the time of President, I was an activist and finished the most important tasks, how to say, inside as well as outside. And the last and most difficult task that I was given was the Chief of Protocol of the President's Funeral. I mean, all of them did their own work, but I had the greatest responsibility. I happened to be in various funerals of the ones that were killed by the police, or of our people who were killed after the war. Unfortunately, I had to deal with them, because people had to be buried. Without it being my profession, I was engaged in the organization of the funerals, without it being my profession I was engaged in reconciliations, without journalism, documentary and publicistic, journalistic photography being my profession, I was engaged in it, how to say I, had no permission, I was not accredited as a street photographer. Several times the police took money from me and that was around 40-50 thousand [deutsche] marks at the time. They would take it and say, "You have the permission for the shop, right?" Because they knew you from the region, I knew them as well, he would say, "Come and take it tomorrow," dare you go and take it. The camera costed one thousand, one thousand and five hundred, two thousand and so on.

[The interviewer asks the speaker to add something for the end, if there is something that remained unsaid during the interview. The question was cut from the video interview.]

Sali Cacaj: The echo was extraordinary, I told you, extraordinary. For nine years in a row, we held the meeting on every Friday in the Council of Human Rights, and I remember that Adem [Demaçi]⁶⁸ was at our first, second and third. As leading members of the Council we welcomed foreign delegations, I guarded [the material] in the Council, I showed my materials a hundred times. An extraordinary work was done in the Council of Human Rights, a part of the intellectual elite was involved there, it worked in a very good way through the municipalities because there were sub-councils and sub-branches of

⁶⁸ 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.

the municipalities and they had their representatives. There were commissions for information in every village, and when foreign delegations came for visits we showed the documents, the photographs, the medical records about the case, the violence that had happened, the police violence, mainly the police and the Serbian State security, first the Yugoslav one, then the one of Serbia and Montenegro, then only of Serbia, because it happened gradually.

The order was, each case had its files, we checked them every ten days, I checked them every week, I brought materials whenever there was a need for them, I mean hundreds of photographs, hundreds of thousands of photographs. Because as I told you, I developed them with my own machine, photograph machine, not only from the region that I photographed, but I also took the negative [films] which I developed and then sent back here. It worked extraordinarily well, there were some more characteristic cases of the constant delegations that came, various journalists, various diplomats, people such as secretary Zenun,⁶⁹ then the other and the other, they changed with time. The Leader of the Council Bajram Kelmendi etc., Adem and Professor Mark, Adem Bajri, Ymer Jaka, Nekibe [Kelmendi],⁷⁰ Avni Spahiu and many others. Adem was also the Head of the Council of Human Rights. They showed the violence with facts and testimony, I remember I was present in that meetings as well as in many other meetings where Bajram Kelmendi asked the Head of the Council of Human Rights, Adem Demaçi, to approve and raise an indictment at The Hague Court against Milošević. The minutes of the meeting must be somewhere, and it was unanimously approved. And the commission that would be in charge for the preparation of the subject was created right away.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What commission?

Sali Cacaj: The commission in charge for the preparation of the subject against, the preparation of the testimony, the testimony that were sent to The Hague. Bajram was the head, there was Azem, Adem Hajri, Fazli Bala, professor Mark, Ymer Jaka, Zenun Çelaj, and I was involved in that commission as well. I offered the testimony through photographs, we prepared five thousand photographs in three turns, which were given for that subject, in order to prove the testimony.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was this in '96 or '97?

Sali Cacaj: No, this was earlier, I am not sure, I guess Azem passed away in '96, I guess it was in '94, it could even be earlier or later. And now one has the right to think, but maybe the main reason Bajram went missing together with his children is because he made the indictment. But, he had also officially showed on the media that he made the indictment, the lawyers, the attorneys who made the indictment, Fazli Bala, Adem Bajri, Mustafë Radoniqi was there. I am sorry for not mentioning all of the people but there were around ten, eight attorneys, Nekibe [Kelmendi] was there as well.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were these indictments built upon facts, testimonies that were related to the Kosovars case?

⁶⁹ Zenun Çelaj, journalist and activist, secretary of the KMLDNJ.

⁷⁰ Nekibe Kelmendi (1944-2011), 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.

Sali Cacaj: The cases, we chose the most difficult cases, because we also had 80-85 years old people who were beaten and mistreated as well as women and children who were beaten. But there was also the other part of the army.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: The coffins?

Sali Cacaj: Yes, the coffins as well, we also had facts and testimony. Then about the cases of murders which were not few, that came out of the police, they went inside the police station and came out dead... in Deçan, I guess in Peja, Klina. There was Zenun Lushaj in Deçan, two teachers who were... those two teachers, there were various cases, how to say, these were the cases that were considered more difficult, the medical reports were collected, we had them as well, if I am not mistaken Bakalli, he was the one who did the autopsies at that time. He had, he was a member of the Council, he officially did the autopsies, their reports, his report, the medical report. And the facts and testimonies were collected accordingly in a professional way, of course we also attached the photographic materials.

Erëmirë Krasniqi:... until when did you work in the Council, your activities in the Council?

Sali Cacaj: In the Council? Until the war, we did.