

# Oral History Kosovo

---

## INTERVIEW WITH AJTEN PLLANA

Pristina | Date: November 21, 2018

Duration: 102 minutes

Present:

1. Ajten Pllana (Speaker)
2. Kaltrina Krasniqi (Interviewer)
3. Donjetë Berisha (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

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Can you tell us anything about your childhood? What kind of child were you? Where did you live? About your family? About the first years of your life?

**Ajten Pllana:** I was born in Skopje. My father is... my father is from Skopje, my mother is from Presevo. They got married in 1930 and my father was an only child, but he wanted to have many kids. So, we were eight children, but two died as babies, two boys, so we are four brothers and two sisters, I am the third child.

I can say that we had a very good childhood until 1946. We lived with our grandparents. In '41, when the war started, we feared that something very bad would happen and we would end up stuck in Skopje, we went to my mother's house, my maternal grandmother's house where my aunt lived in Presevo. We lived there for a year. But, there was no big war in Skopje. After the Bulgarians came, they were in coalition with the Germans and there wasn't much.

So in '44, the end of '44, we returned [to Skopje] from Presevo. Then the first schools in Albanian were opened, for the first time in Albanian history, the first schools [in Skopje]. Even though I was very young, I knew a boy, he was my father's uncle's son from Gjilan, he came and said, "I will take you to school," to enroll us. When he took me there, the principal did not take me because he said, "Too young", six years old. My uncle, "Come one, let the girl enroll," he says, "she is six and a half years old." Anyways, that's how I became a student in the history of Skopje to enroll at an Albanian language school in Albanian and I was the youngest in the class.

But, by chance, there happened to be 15, 14, and 12 years old girls in the first grade, and after a year, two stopped going to school. And years later, they went to Turkey. It was the time when a lot of people migrated there but I stayed. Then *Shkolla Normale*<sup>1</sup> was opened, it was moved from Tetovo to Skopje and I continued my education at *Shkolla Normale*. My mother wanted that because her sisters were teachers in the nineteenth century, of course in Turkish, because there was no schools in Albanian and... so from the first generation by chance, not that I was very good or, but it so happened that I

---

<sup>1</sup> The *Shkolla Normale* opened in Gjakova in 1948 to train the teachers needed for the newly opened schools. With the exception of a brief interlude during the Italian Fascist occupation of Kosovo during the Second World War, these were the first schools in the Albanian language that Kosovo ever had. In 1953, the *Shkolla Normale* moved to Pristina.

became the first teacher of the first school in Albanian in Skopje. So now... I used to not give it importance, but now I am kind of proud that I was the one who... (laughs). One always tries to find something that suits them or that they think is good.

And I think up until '46, we had a very good life. My father was a very modern man, very... but then '45 came... during the summer of '46 my maternal uncle visited, he was in the Albanian National Democratic Organization.<sup>2</sup> He was Ibrahim Kelmendi, a history professor at the Pristina gymnasium,<sup>3</sup> who had majored in history in Zagreb. He was also a soldier and he came to our house and asked to stay for a while. My father said, "It's okay." He stayed with us for two weeks. They held those meetings of the organization that operated in Skopje. After two weeks, he left and after a while they imprisoned my father and then a very hard life began (cries) for our family. We were five children left with a stay-at-home mother. My oldest brother was twelve years old, not even twelve, the youngest was a year and half and only we know how these years were (cries).

They were very hard years, but this [situation] (cries) somehow followed us throughout our lives. My oldest brother was imprisoned, he was a lawyer, and majored in law. My father was imprisoned, my brother, then my other brother, and then in '81 my sister was fired from work, she was an Albanian language teacher, and my other brother, he was a professor and a journalist. There was always something, but we stayed strong and we were the first family from Skopje that everyone was educated, except for one of my brothers. Although he was the smartest, smartest in the family, he wanted to work as a professional cyclist, so he didn't pursue higher education. The rest of us got an education, we had a normal life. The family grew, we got married. I was just now in Skopje, they're good, they live a normal life.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** How was life in Skopje when you were there during the war years?

**Ajten Pllana:** Look, people at that time were very simple and they had some sort of... people were ashamed to complain. Or us, for example, nobody knew how we were living at home, but it wasn't easy, it wasn't easy. You had to fight for basic things, bread was the main item. You were given a piece of bread for the whole day, that's all we got, nothing more. Those who were from villages had more opportunities, more access to food, to... when it came to wood supply, even that was with vouchers. Also other food items, all with vouchers... But, as far as school goes, schools were open and there was a concern for children. For example, during summer break, they used to send children for a month or two to three weeks for free to the beach, or the mountains, or somewhere. Or the packages that came from America, the UNRA<sup>4</sup> would give them out and, as little as it was, it improved people's economic conditions.

It wasn't easy, but we got through those years. Those who had a higher position even then, things were better for them even at that time. But for us, for example, there was no one to take care of us. As a family, we suffered a lot, but nobody knew. My mother was very proud and she tried not to let it show.

<sup>2</sup> *Lëvizja Nacional-Demokratike Shqiptare* - The National Democratic Albanian Movement aimed at unifying all territories inhabited by Albanians and was thus considered illegal by Yugoslavia.

<sup>3</sup> A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** What kind of neighborhood did you live in? What kind of city was Skopje?

**Ajten Pllana:** Skopje... look, Skopje was... Skopje was divided in two parts, Vardar divided it into two parts. I don't know, I think only three or four Albanian families lived across the bridge. We always referred to it as the other side of the bridge, that's how we divided Skopje, this side of the bridge and the other side of the bridge. The old part of the city... I used to live where the Stone Bridge<sup>5</sup> is, and then came, there... Do you know Skopje a bit?... There where Skanderbeg's monument is, our house was about a hundred meters away. You can say it was in the center of the city, it wasn't peripheral.

The new part... the part past Vardar was a very beautiful city, the buildings very... After the Balkan Wars, new houses were built, while the part where we lived was mostly oriental, oriental houses. Here and there a bigger house, more beautiful, more... The roads only started getting paved a little after the war. Where the new road is today, the new road that connects Bit Bazaar with the Iron Bridge, which was known as Iron Bridge<sup>6</sup> then. But there was order in the city, it was a very clean city. Every day we had to clean in front of our doorstep, to clean the street. Every spring, we had to paint the house... by law we were obliged to paint the exterior walls of the house, with either lime or paint.

The cleaner, the one who would pick up the garbage, the garbage collector, would come once everyday... with a *brrr* {onomatopoeic}, would pass by and we would know he arrived. How do I say it... then the construction started, schools were built. We didn't have schools, instead the schools were in the yards of mosques, known as *mejtep*<sup>7</sup> from before Turkey's times [Ottomans]. And we went to those schools, from one school to the other until we got to the fourth grade. We regularly had to change schools until we found an appropriate space.

And then when we got to the first year of high school, then the fifth grade was called the first grade of high school, a very beautiful school was built, Iliria Elementary School. Even today I still envy that school, it followed the latest architectural trend. Everything was there, every classroom even had water, a sink where we washed our hands, or the sponge, and there was a cinema or a theater hall, the canteen was downstairs. Plus, there were bathrooms where pupils could shower after physical education class, although, I think it was used very little, I don't know, it was in the basement and it was heated with wood.

It was a very good school. There was a lot of discipline. Our teachers were mostly from Albania, or from [North] Macedonia, or from Kosovo but studied there. I know that my teacher from second grade, back

---

<sup>5</sup> The Stone Bridge (Macedonian: *Kamen most*, Albanian: *Ura e gurit*, Turkish: *Taşköprü*) is a bridge across the Vardar River in Skopje, the capital of the Republic of North Macedonia. Two parts of Skopje that have symbolized its urban contrasts of "Ottoman" or "modern," the "historic" or "socialist," "Albanian" or "Macedonian" are split by the river Vardar and linked by the Stone Bridge. Today, members of the majority and minority groups of the capital city perceive the stone bridge as representing the split between two parts of Skopje.

<sup>6</sup> The Iron Bridge, which bridges the River Vardar near the building of the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, was built in 1905 by the Skopje municipality. In Ottoman times it was known as the Shefket Pasha Bridge and led to the Bit Bazaar. It was damaged during the bombing of Skopje on April 6, 1941. It was renovated in 1963 and completely reconstructed in 2011. Today it is called the Bridge of Revolution.

<sup>7</sup> *Mejtep*, *Maktab* also called a *Kuttab* or school, is an elementary school. Though it was primarily used for teaching children how to read, write, grammar and Islamic studies such as Qira'at (Quranic recitation), other practical and theoretical subjects were also often taught.

then the teacher would change every year. My first teacher was from Presevo, and my second teacher was from Dibra who studied in Tirana. I can still hear her voice, her diction, the way she would talk. We didn't speak Albanian, most of us spoke Turkish, even though we were Albanian.

At some later point I asked my brother, "Why is it like this?" He said, "Well, the language of prestige, that's how people perceive the Turkish language." You received a different treatment when you spoke Turkish or, and... but we learnt Albanian in school, we had good teachers. For example, there was Doctor Petro Janura teaching there [at Iliria Elementary School], he was a primary school teacher. Then there was Petro Kavaja, there was Mahmut Dumani from Albania and many others. There were a lot. Now I can remember better those who taught more in my class. My brothers also had teachers.

But in '48, when Yugoslavia ended diplomatic relations with Russia, relations with Albania suffered too. Then they took them back to Albania or they could pick where they wanted to go. Do they want to go to Albania or to Western countries? Some of the teachers went to America, some to Italy and some went back to Albania. They had... it is thanks to them that we learned Albanian. Kids that attended schools in Skopje could speak very well, they had very... and they [the teachers] worked hard with us.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** What kind of child were you? What kind of temperament did you have?

**Ajten Pllana:** What?

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** What kind of child were you? What kind of temperament did you have?

**Ajten Pllana:** Well as a child, as a child, (laughs) it was like everywhere else. The conditions weren't the same as today, right? In the streets, for example, as for the neighborhood, friends, different games... boys preferred other things. And later in school, I was a happy kid, we were kids that didn't know any better at that time, right? We were happy with what was served to us. But how teachers approached us meant a lot, we were like... look, teachers with their attitudes and behaviors affect students because students always try to mirror them. I, for example, always looked up at my teachers because there were two or three different ones, and we always tried... because they were something more than our mothers, right? And kids with few, how do I say, requests because there was nothing more to ask for, like this.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Did you then continue after elementary school, how was the system?

**Ajten Pllana:** Yes, I stopped for a year. I finished seventh grade and there was no school. So, I had to stay home. My father was still in jail and I was stuck. I turned into a kind of housewife, I went to the market, cooked, and helped my mother a little. And the next year, the eighth grade started. Eighth grade at that time because the system changed, then the eighth grade wasn't high school anymore but elementary school. And I joined the class there, I went back to school. At that time, the principal and teachers came to us as we were finishing the eighth grade and told us girls, "Come to *Shkolla Normale* because we need more girls, there were almost all boys in *Normale*."

And some girls went, three or four went. My father said to me, "No, no, no, you shouldn't be a teacher, you will be a doctor, you will become something, you will go to gymnasium." "Daddy," I would say, "I don't have... We don't have a school in Albanian, I would have to do it in Macedonian." "Okay, okay Amir is going..." my big brother. [Dad said] "In the Macedonian gymnasium, you go too." But, but, no.

The next year I enrolled in the Macedonian gymnasium. My brother was a senior there in the gymnasium and one day he asked me, "How is it going?" I said, "Very hard, I don't understand anything." "Why? You know Macedonian." "Yes, I do, but everything is new for me. Take physics, chemistry, math and language and everything." "You know what? Take your documents and enroll in *Normale*." I couldn't wait, but I asked, "What about father..." He said, "Who is asking father. You go there."

Then my father quickly found out, "Which school are you going to?" I said, "I'm going to gymnasium." "Are you lying?" "No," I said, "I'm not lying." My brother said, "Don't torture the girl. I told her to go to *Normale*." And then it was good, I finished it, but in five years; I always had such luck. For my generation *Normale* was five years, then it immediately went back to being four years. So, a year more. So, *Normale* was very... there was order, it was a good school. There were good students, good teachers too. But, there were very few girls in our class. We were only three seniors when we finished *Normale*, we were only three girls.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Why were there only a few girls?

**Ajten Pllana:** What?

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Why were there only a few girls?

**Ajten Pllana:** Well most of them, most of them emigrated to Turkey, and a part were still conservative you know: "Why would a girl go to school, she should stay home." And [families] wouldn't send them to school. The citizens of Skopje were very conservative, they weren't like in Pristina. When I came to Pristina, I realized people were more progressive than in Skopje. And, like this, slowly things changed. And they realized that it is good for women to get an education, like this.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** There's a moment in your book where you talk about *ferexhe*.<sup>8</sup>

**Ajten Pllana:** Yes, yes.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Can you talk a little about that moment?

**Ajten Pllana:** Well look, my [paternal] uncle's daughter was married to a professor here [in Pristina]. Her husband was a professor. And you know, when she came to Skopje without a *ferexhe*, at that time in '47- '48- '49 [these were] always [worn by women]. I hadn't been in Pristina before that, so I didn't know, but she would tell us that most women, not most, but some that were more progressive, that were going to school, they were taking off the *ferexhe*. People were surprised there [in Skopje], "How come there are women without the *ferexhe*." And the time came, in '48, I think, the action for removing *ferexhe*, in '49, but in Skopje no one, only... Even our teachers would come to school with the *ferexhe*. Those who were, for example, Nafije Qerkezi was my teacher and she would come to school with, they would call them *peçe*,<sup>9</sup> she would take it off at school and then put it on again when she went back home, that's how it was.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** What was it like? Can you explain to us what it was like?

<sup>8</sup> *Ferexhe*, a veil concealing the entire face except the eyes, worn by Muslim women in public.

<sup>9</sup> The front of the veil.

**Ajten Pllana:** What the *ferexhe* was like... it was a black dress. A black dress that was a bit looser, then there was a cloak, a cloak with also that part on the head. First, you wear the dress, then the part that was like a veil, one was a little thinner, one fuller. Those that were thinner you could see through, but usually young women, more modern women would wear those. Not our mothers, you could not see their faces at all {points to her face}. They put on their cloaks<sup>10</sup> which would be tied under the headscarf, and that would cover them up from head to toe {shows with her hands}, it was very loose and that's how they used to dress.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Color... what color were they?

**Ajten Pllana:** The color was mostly black, only black. The drapery was always black. I saw some others in Bosnia with white and blue stripes and... in movies. I wasn't there. While here, they were black. And those women that were more modern, they didn't wear a *ferexhe* like other women, like my mother, like most of the women, but they usually wore a beautiful cloak. Thin socks, shoes, their sandals or good shoes and then the cloak that I mentioned. It [the cloak] was very short, they just tied it to the neck a little {shows with her hands}, while the *ferexhe* was thin, very thin. Especially those women who were very beautiful, they would be visible underneath and people would look. There the thing was that you had to... But young women, there were some young women in our neighborhood that would never go out into the streets alone. Instead they would take us ten, nine, eight-year-old girls with them to go somewhere. Because [back then] you shouldn't, you know, young women shouldn't go out alone, instead they should go with their mother-in-law or some other woman. If there wasn't anyone else, they would take a child, an eight-nine-year-old child.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** At what age? At what age?

**Ajten Pllana:** At what age? Well, my mother used to say she was twelve when she first put on the *ferexhe*, like that, ten-twelve years old, when girls start to grow up they would start to cover up. I (laughs)... once I agreed with girls in my neighborhood that each of us would take our mother's *ferexhe* and wear them when we went out into the street; and we were ten. Each of us wore one. We were five or six girls and we went out into the street. We didn't walk but two hundred meters, "*Kuku*,<sup>11</sup> what do we do now? We are ashamed to take them off in the street." (laughs) And you couldn't do that. And my mother was a *hafiz*.<sup>12</sup> She finished [the Quran] and knew it by heart, so together with her brother in elementary school, she became a *hafiz*. And her father was an imam and all that, so when they [the progressives] wanted to remove the *ferexhe* she was against it, "How will I go out?" Also, my father was in prison. But, we got used to it through the years.

When my mother was old and very sick, she was 96-97 years old, some young married women that lived in the same building with her in Skopje came to visit. And all of them were now wearing a *ferexhe*, all covered. And they stayed, they talked, "Why..." she [mother] said, "my girls, why are you wearing a *ferexhe*? It is not the time," she said, "It was different in my time." They were just staring, and they said,

<sup>10</sup> The speaker explains the women's garment nonverbally, and at times it becomes confusing for those only reading and not watching the interview. To facilitate meaning: the cloak was from head to toe and was tied under the headscarf. Once the cloak was tied it would cover women entirely. The cloak was the top layer of the multi-layered garment.

<sup>11</sup> Colloquial, expresses disbelief, distress, or wonder, depending on the context.

<sup>12</sup> Muslim that knows the Quran by heart.



“She is a *hafiz*.” “I am a *hafiz*. I am very...” And you know... So my mother tries to convince them and says, “It was different in my time,” and she says, “I know what it means and why you wear a *ferexhe* and... But now the times have changed.” She says, “I am religious and I hold the Quran in my hands all day long, but you are young.” But no, they were convinced that...

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** What is a *hafiz*?

**Ajten Pllana:** *hafiz* is a person who learns the Quran by heart. My mother until the end, until she died, knew the Quran by heart. Imagine, they learned the Quran in Arabic, and they didn’t know Arabic. If they knew the language it would have been different, but my grandfather explained to my mother how things went so she would understand, you know. She could speak old Turkish, Ottoman, and in that language she could even write and so...

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Were you, the children, religious?

**Ajten Pllana:** Religious? Religious, religious where? (Laughs) No. Being religious means if you go and... my brother, my older brother, it was the time of the occupation, the school opened... Bulgarians opened Turkish schools, he went there and he learned Arabic. Arabic, not the language, but the Arabic letters, the old Turkish. But not us. We didn’t go to school, but, of course, we have basic Islamic knowledge of course. As a young girl, I used to fast during Ramadan but not now. When I got married, children, things and I stopped. My mother didn’t like that, but our mother also taught us to pray when we sleep, to pray when we go to bed, to pray when we eat, when we wake up, and so on. Our mother taught us to be good children, honorable, to not do that, not do this.

She wanted more but times then were like that, there weren’t any religious schools. A school was opened, they took us. My mother, she took me and my sister there for two months or I don’t know how long, then we quit and she used to say, “I took you there and you didn’t do anything.” I would ask, “What was that? We would sit on the floor, she [the teacher] would sit still...” The teacher had a stick two or three meters long and if someone moved just a little... And we didn’t understand anything in Arabic. We went there for two hours in the morning and then, in the afternoon we went to elementary school and then we quit, two schools at the same time. Of course, that I... I was educated in that religion, do you understand, the most important things I hold dear. Though I don’t hate anyone whatever their religion might be, it isn’t...

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** There’s a moment in your book where you talk about early childhood and about the poverty that existed immediately after the Second World War, how children were fed in the city’s canteens. Can you elaborate a little more on that time after the Second World War?

**Ajten Pllana:** Yes, yes, yes. Look, I think somewhere around ‘48, after separating from the Soviet Union, things started moving, you know, in... in a positive direction I think,, especially for children. In neighborhoods... In our neighborhood, there was a restaurant where children would go and take a piece of bread, they didn’t have to pay. It was only bread, only bread. White bread, a piece of it and nothing else. Only when we went, when we started going there, we saw that everybody... My family wasn’t the only one that was suffering, everyone was suffering and in need of basic things, for bread. And before we went to school we went there to get the bread and no one would pay anything.



After a year, it became like a cafeteria, it would feed a lot of children. We would go in there and sometimes they would give us two pieces of bread and even jam sometimes, and sometimes, they would give us cheese or something. But we couldn't take it outside, but everybody would try to sneak something out to take it home. And a woman stayed at the door and would check us to see if we were taking any bread and had put it somewhere on our bodies. And we would be ashamed if we got caught (laughs) but when we did manage to take it home, you know, it was a little... for example, two or three kids from the same family go and eat.

The best part was, canteens were opened in schools. Our school had a very good canteen and every day there was soup. We would have dishes with meat. And one day [years later] when I was talking to my sister, I asked, "How could the state afford all of those, for every school to have a canteen?" She said, "It was through help from the United States of America to feed the children."

Even a good lunch was a big deal for a family or if you had three or four children at school. I mean, we would fight for basic things at that time, right, when you didn't have good food at home. And those who had connections, there were people who had a good life or were employed somewhere and they were better off than those who lived in poor conditions.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** For what reason did your father go to prison ?

**Ajten Pllana:** My father was in prison because of my [maternal] uncle. He [my father] let him stay in our house for two weeks. My father was very generous, he would give away the clothes off his back if he could help someone... My uncle had an organization in Skopje... our teachers, the teachers in our school were members of [this organization], the Albanian National Democratic Organization and my father... most... a lot of them were in the mountains at the time, Albanian *Ballist*<sup>13</sup> that... And my father had bought them 600 pairs of *opinga*<sup>14</sup> to help them, and he gave them money, so because he had money and he took our uncle in.

We didn't know. My uncle didn't tell my father nor my mother where he was going, he went out every night, he came... He was very meticulous, very handsome. His barber would come to shave him and leave. My mother was asking him, she asked him but I didn't hear, "Where are you going every night, Ibrahim?" He said, "My teeth, my teeth are not okay, I'm repairing them." And my mother believed him. And on the night of Eid of '46, a vehicle came to our house, a horse-drawn vehicle. They put old villagers clothes on my uncle and a *plis*<sup>15</sup> and laid him down on that vehicle and left. That was the last time we saw our uncle, it was the night of Eid, during Ramadan, so, the night of Eid. He went to the village of Kumanova, he stayed there for a while, for how long? I don't know. And then to Greece. From Greece to Germany, from Germany to Australia until he died in '97, he died in '97.

He was offered a chance to go to America, but under one condition, there were... he had a... foreign countries wanted to organize, I don't know, to land with a parachute in Albania [as the start of an

<sup>13</sup> *Balli Kombëtar* (National Front) was an Albanian nationalist, anti-communist organization established in November 1942, an insurgency that fought against Nazi Germany and Yugoslav partisans. It was headed by Midhat Frashëri, and supported the unification of Albanian inhabited lands.

<sup>14</sup> *Opinga*: Similar to moccasins, made out of rubber or bovine leather, mainly used by the villagers.

<sup>15</sup> Traditional white felt conic cap, differs from region to region, distinctively Albanian.

organized coup] against Enver [Hoxha]'s<sup>16</sup> communism. So they, my uncle and some others said, "We don't fight with our brothers, regardless of them being communists. We can't." And the response was, "You can't go to America. Choose where you want to go." He didn't want to go to Italy because it was very near, and the UDB<sup>17</sup> did things [disappeared and killed people in foreign countries]... and so he went to Australia and married an English woman. That's her {points to the photograph}. He didn't have children, he died there. He was very lively until the end, like this.

## Part Two

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Tell me a little bit about the times you visited your father in prison, how were they?

**Ajten Pllana:** Well, my father, in the beginning... In the beginning, my father was in the OZNA,<sup>18</sup> investigative prison, he was there. It was... it was a very tough prison (cries) I found out later, my father told my sister, he never told me (cries). Because my father was suffering [from torture], his kidneys were failing, but he wouldn't tell us anything. While he was under investigation, they would cover him with a blanket and then beat him with wood and other objects, so his kidneys were bruised for years.

We couldn't visit him there, we could only take food to him. One day, my mother saw that, in some aluminum containers that she used to take food to the prison, there was something written in Arabic letters, "Fatush, how are you? The kids? Take care of the kids." You know, a few sentences like this. Then we always brought new ones, you know, and my mother would write, "We're good, don't worry."

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** And what happened to those aluminum containers?

**Ajten Pllana:** Luckily they were never discovered because who knows what would have happened. My father would write something, my mother would answer and that's how they communicated, otherwise they didn't have access [to each other], they couldn't meet. For a long time... My father was in the investigative prison for a long time. In the meantime, before my father... the National Democratic Organization was discovered, where my uncle had been a member, but my uncle had already left. Then three to four of our teachers were imprisoned: Mister Azem Orana, Mister... what's his name, I forgot it momentarily, and Mahmut Dumani from Albania. Those two were, one was from Pristina, Hasan Billali. So, Azem Orana, Hasan Billali, and Mister Mamut Dumani, from elementary school, from high school, I don't know. And in '47, they were held. Before my father there was another

<sup>16</sup> Enver Hoxha (1908-1985) was the leader of the Albanian Communist Party who ruled Albania as a dictator until his death.

<sup>17</sup> The State Security Service (SDB or SDS), more commonly known by its original name as the State Security Administration (UDBA or UDSA), was the secret police of Yugoslavia. Best known at all times simply by the acronym UDBA, in its latter decades it was composed of six semi-independent secret police organizations—one for each of the six Yugoslav federal republics—coordinated by the central federal office.

<sup>18</sup> OZNA (*Odeljenje za zaštitu naroda*), acronym for Department of National Security, the Yugoslav security service operating between 1944 and 1946, notorious for the establishment of a terror regime comparable to the KGB terror in Russia.

group, another group, my father was in another group with those... They [the other group] were the main group.

So... my brother's teacher, Mister Azem Orana, was sentenced to death. He was married. He was imprisoned a week after he got married and was sentenced to death. Mister Azem Bilalli was sentenced to twenty years in prison. He was my teacher's second brother, he was sentenced to twenty years in prison, but he got out of prison after twelve years. And my uncle was sentenced to death, but he wasn't there, [sentenced] in absentia. It wasn't only the Albanian party [that was targeted], but the Turks also had a party, it was called Yücel; I remember that one of them was sentenced to death, he was the father of one of my friends, who later became a pianist.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** What kind of organization was this?

**Ajten Pllana:** What?

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** What kind of organization was this?

**Ajten Pllana:** The Albanian Democratic National Organization.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Was this a political party, political organization? Do you know anything more about the organization?

**Ajten Pllana:** Well, it was an organization for the union of the Albanian lands against communism, so they weren't communists, like this.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Let's continue with your life, what happened after you finished *Normale*?

**Ajten Pllana:** I finished *Normale* and then I got married. My kismet was in Pristina. I got married here.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Who did you marry?

**Ajten Pllana:** Professor Shefqet Pllana. He was an albanologist. He did his scholarly work in [social] science, he studied folklore, and then later he did his graduate and doctoral studies in folk literature, he would teach...

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Where did you meet him?

**Ajten Pllana:** Where did I meet him? That's very interesting (laughs), you won't believe me. In '58, we were in the hall of... In the *Normale* student canteen, on the stage being prepared... They [some employees] came from Radio Skopje to record, to record a few songs by our choir. There was a leader, Parasqeva, I don't know her last name. She was from Albania. She was a very good speaker on Radio Skopje in Albanian. Our choir recorded the songs for the Radio. In the meantime, a teacher that I knew came. He was married to a friend of mine. He came with another person and I saw that they sat. Nobody else was in the hall, only the two of them, and when the recording was over, I went down, the stairs were on the side, I went down and turned my head and looked at them.

I saw one of them was looking at me and I turned my head around. And he asked who I was. And then, things got complicated and so. In August, the daughter of his niece was over at my house and told me

about him. I said, “Okay, let me see.” We [the man and I] met and after a week we got engaged. After two or three weeks, we got married (laughs). It’s a wonder!

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** And then from Skopje you came to Pristina?

**Ajten Pllana:** From Skopje I came to Pristina. But he was a very good man, very, very modern, very... he had a broad culture, a... he was a good father and everything. So I left for Pristina.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Tell me about the moment when you changed cities, from Skopje to Pristina. How did you find Pristina?

**Ajten Pllana:** Do you know what bothered me the most [in Pristina]? At the time, women here wore *dimija* or *kule*,<sup>19</sup> they called them *kule*. They were like *dimija*, but not that loose. In Skopje, nobody wore *dimija*. City people didn’t wear them, even those that came from the village did not wear them. That bothered me. And the girls, the girls did not wear trousers at that time, but they also did not go out much, but they hung out in the neighborhood, they stayed home and always wore those *kule*. They really annoyed me, they bothered me a lot. They would say, “It’s warm, but with these it feels cooler.”

Pristina... I would tell my father, “Come more often to Skopje.”<sup>20</sup> He was very meticulous, “No daughter, the moment that I step into the street, there’s mud immediately.” The roads weren’t even paved. Citizens of Pristina suffered in that old Pristina, but, if they had had my eyes, and seen, not even Skopje... Even Skopje had that, but it was different, but what....

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Which neighborhood did you live in first in Pristina, in which neighborhood?

**Ajten Pllana:** Here, in this yard, we used to have our old house and then we built this. Ever since I came here. And for a time, when people started building houses, we also discussed, “Let’s move and go somewhere further away.” But seeing that my school was near, the music school was near, the girls were here in elementary school, the high school was here. I would say, “The market is near, if you were to get elected as a member of parliament, the Executive Council is here.” (Laughs) We would joke, everything is near. It was convenient for me since I had four children, right, I was alone. I adapted. More commitments at home with the children, they would learn; they finished high school and that’s how it went.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** How many children do you have?

**Ajten Pllana:** Four.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Tell me a little about your children and your family life?

**Ajten Pllana:** Well, look, my oldest daughter is a pianist and a professor here at the University. She married a very good man who is a doctor. But he was crazy about going to America, he wanted to go to America and my daughter was persuaded as well, even though she didn’t want to go. She finished that [university] here, she would teach at the University, at the Academy of Music. In Moscow, she

<sup>19</sup> Billowing white satin pantaloons that narrow at the ankles, Turkish style. They are made with about twelve meters of fabric.

<sup>20</sup> The speaker means to say Pristina, but says Skopje.

specialized in Tchaikovsky [Conservatory], then she had a lot of opportunities for advancement, for... In Yugoslavia, she held concerts for the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution; she even held a concert in Paris. She went there, now she teaches at the University, and she has two boys.

My second daughter... my second daughter studied architecture and lives in London. She is very successful, very ambitious, and she's settled. She was the inspiration for the book because I only started to write my childhood memories, and from... "No, Mom..." she says. At some point, she saw all of it, "Mom, this is very good, we'll turn this into a book." I said, "Are you crazy? A book?" I said, "It's just a way for you to remember." "No, no. We will publish it." So on. And the third one, Arta, she studied Albanology and works here in the government somewhere. I don't know what, I don't know those things. And my son is, he finished in... his graduate degree in London as a [music] producer. It's been seven-eight years, but there's no work; he is working downstairs, there [on the first floor of the family home] he opened a studio, like this.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** You started working here immediately, right?

**Ajten Pllana:** What?

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** You started working here immediately, right?

**Ajten Pllana:** Yes, yes.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** What year did you start and at which school?

**Ajten Pllana:** I, in 1960, started for the first time. No sorry, in '58, when I got married, two months after I was accepted to work at Emin Duraku Elementary School.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Where is that school?

**Ajten Pllana:** It is past the market, that part is like... I worked there for a year, then I gave birth to my oldest daughter Teuta. I stopped [working] for a year, I had to learn as a new mother how to take care of my daughter. And in 1960, I started working at this school and I worked here at this school until I retired.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** At which school?

**Ajten Pllana:** Elena Gjika Elementary School, which used to be called Vuk Karadžić. After I retired, after the changes [the war], it took the name Elena Gjika.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Tell me about the atmosphere at the school, the staff? We should take into account that people don't know the history of this school, so you have to explain it with more detail.

**Ajten Pllana:** Well, look, (laughs) when I started working here, I would always compare it to the school I used to go to, Illiria, in Skopje because they were both elementary schools so I would compare them. That school was... it's amazing when you think about it today, that kind of school, but it [Illiria] was destroyed by an earthquake, unfortunately. When I came here, this [Elena Gjika] was an old school with old planks and the classes would use wood for heating. The cleaning lady would come all the time to bring wood and stuff, but there were only a few children studying in the Albanian language, I

mean, there were more Serbian children, more Serbian classes rather than Albanian. Then our classes grew. There was a lot of order, there was order, it was clean.

After every break... after every break, when we went back to class, the cleaning crew would clean the halls, it was very clean. The conditions for work were minimal, there were no tables; and old, everything was old, but compared to Skopje... Things were different in Skopje, the conditions were different in *Normale*. We would, for example, have classes in labs. The classes in labs were biology, or, or I don't know physics, chemistry, and for Albanian language there was a classroom like a library. And here there weren't those conditions, no.

Every three or four years from the '60s, I know that some fundamental renovations were done, I mean fundamental. But, is it the teachers fault, or the students fault, or just disinterest? Now, I don't know how it is because this year they renovated it again. But we had a very good staff, I believe they still are like that. At that time, there were very good teachers, very good teachers.

We weren't many, we were perhaps seven or eight teachers, nine, and there was Myzafer Hatipi, a primary school teacher that studied in Albania. Then there was Lirie Tanefi, an old lady from Albania, from Korça. There was Nyvebete Drini, she was a great teacher. There was Edibe Pula, I'm talking about the old generations, I am talking about them. Fahrije Shita was a math teacher, very prepared for her subject. Then there were a few male teachers, there were two or three, but no more. Then Nyvebeti, Edibja were also primary school teachers. Then I was also added to the staff and like this...

We are... one day we were talking, we are very proud when there's someone, some intellectuals that are well-known like, like, that are important, that have a... They were at our school. Even Pupovci was a student in our school, and this guy, I always forget his name, the one who owned Koha Ditore<sup>21</sup>....

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Surroi.

**Ajten Pllana:** Surroi, he was my daughter's classmate. So many doctors, so many... My students have also achieved a lot, it's... I have three or four students who are doctors of science and we are proud of the boys also. Then a lot of other teachers, the first generations were very good, they're still good. The school has tradition, it's a very good school, others schools are too probably, but I didn't have much access to them, but I'm talking about our school. The staff was good and the students were very good.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Was it convenient for you to live this close to the school?

**Ajten Pllana:** (Laughs) A friend of my husband's came over once and asked me, "Where do you work, Madam?" I said, "At this school here." "Do you get on well with the principal?" He asked. "Yes." He said, "Why don't you ask him to bring the class here," he says, "so you don't have to go there." It wasn't that interesting. I envied my friends when the classes would end at 4:00 p.m., and when the day was longer, they would go in and out, go to stores to buy things, and so on. I had to run straight home since I had three kids. When I gave birth to my son. I then had to be home. But, when it rained, or snowed they... I would immediately... Then I would call a friend and ask, "Did you get home?" "*Kuku*," she said, "barely." I said, "I already drank my tea." (Laughs) They would envy me, I was so close. When you have

<sup>21</sup> Daily newspaper in Kosovo founded in 1997 by Veton Surroi, and currently run by his sister Flaka Surroi.

small children, it's better like that, but when they grow up, you get to walk around and see something. Life is like this.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** What, what did you learn while you were a primary school teacher? What did that vocation teach you?

**Ajten Pllana:** What, what do I say... It should sound like I'm praising, but, loving children, trusting them... To work and make the class attractive so they're interested so they're interested and that's that. I think I was happy there, and successful. I think with children... after all, we are human and we can't always be like that, but we have to, the teacher should have a lot of love, to take work seriously, not only work for the money, for that. And kids, kids are eager to learn.

At least, at the time when we were teaching, when we worked, they were eager to learn, for something new and we always had interesting classes, not just classic classes, "Today we're gonna learn about this, this." For example, I never started class without conversing for about two-three minutes, two-three minutes what did you do, what happened. That's how kids relax. Because then when you jump in immediately, "Let me see your homework." That's kind of, how do I say, pressure, and this way [first conversing] they'll think of it as an everyday thing, fun, like that and then...

I gave language a lot of importance. When my kids grew up, then my children's books, the library, all the books I had, maybe two to three hundred books, I gave them to the school's library, and I gave the others to children. Now I wonder if I did the right thing, or not. But my children had already grown up and like this.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** From this perspective, it means that you have lived in Pristina for almost 50 years?

**Ajten Pllana:** What?

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** From this perspective...

**Ajten Pllana:** Yes?

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** It means that you have lived in Pristina for almost 50 years?

**Ajten Pllana:** 60 years.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** 60 years?

**Ajten Pllana:** Yes.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** How has the city change for you?

**Ajten Pllana:** Well, it has changed a lot. It has changed a lot. But what changed is also the mentality and everything, yes... I wouldn't know what to say. I have a lot to say (laughs). I don't know, it's that nostalgia for old times with people who are older or... Because people my age, when we talk about that time we feel like it was better then and kids, kids were more disciplined, they had a... The teachers were more respected, and now something... Look, parents today, I now see with most of them there isn't that criticism, but now it seems like it matters more if the kids wear nice clothes, and



look good, that's not how it is. You have to work hard with children from the very first day if we want them to accomplish something.

How to acquire good habits, work habits, to not feel intimidated by them. I worked a lot with my children. Even though they were quite smart, I was... It felt like an obligation to work with them and the children take... When I see parents, when I read, when I talk with them, they're saying, "They're not working hard enough." You should create those conditions, the conditions today are good, they're not like they used to be. But you have to stay with your kids, there's no going around, no going out *vrc, vrc, vrc* {onomatopoeic} to parties, with friends and stuff. You should work with children, work, work, work. Until the child understands the essence, what is it, why are they going to school, what they should know. But the parents aren't much to blame either, nor the kids, but today's technology.

Two-year-old kids with... this is happening everywhere, not only here. They have everything ready and all day long, instead of reading a book, they stay on their phones. I was in London last... two years ago when my friend. My daughter had a friend who was an architect and she didn't allow her children to watch TV, or any shows throughout the week, instead they had a set time when they could watch or use their phones, or iPad or similar. She said, "On Saturdays, they can do whatever they want, read, watch, or... on other days, no." There's a system, rules. And then these children are more successful. I think, that's what I think, I don't know.

### Part Three

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** We are trying, through individual stories to recall how the city was because in the past 60 years, certainly, you as well know how much it changed, many things that used to exist don't exist anymore. Can you think a little and give us a picture of what kind of city it was, for you?

**Ajten Pllana:** Pristina?

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Yes.

**Ajten Pllana:** You know that the city... the city as such, if I compared it to Skopje, I didn't like it to be honest... but what I liked was that there were many schools in Albanian. There was a gymnasium, Skopje didn't have a gymnasium, they had barely opened *Normale*. There was an Economic School, there was a night school,<sup>22</sup> to attend at night. There was a Music School, a lot of our children were there, so a lot of Albanian children. While in Skopje there was only *Normale* and nothing else, only three girls per school year. Here there were a lot, a lot, that's what kept me and it wasn't only hope, but I was sure that one day these children would achieve something, and that there would be progress.

When my father used to come here, he had an appreciation for education. Because my father was a great writer, great orator, and had beautiful handwriting. We would say, "Dad, how many years did you

---

<sup>22</sup> The night school was called the education one received at a later stage in life. For example, in the past those who did not have any education due to wars or similar, they would go back to school, and those classes were usually scheduled in the late afternoons.

go to school, did you learn?" He said, "For a year." "Why did you go to school for only a year, where did you learn these expressions..." He wouldn't tell us, apparently, he only finished elementary school or something more, but he wouldn't tell us.

And in the mornings, he would come rarely, but sometimes when he would come to stay for two or three days [in Pristina], he went out in the morning and came home at around 8:00 o'clock. He went out earlier in the morning, "Where were you, Daddy?" He would say, "You know what? I stand there by the clock tower and watch the kids go to school at the gymnasium. All of them speak Albanian." (laughs) That left an impression on him because he didn't see that in Skopje. I would say to him, "You like them that much?" "How can I not, such nice children..." That left an impression on him fifty and somewhat years ago. He said, "Some nice kids with bags in their hands going to the gymnasium, dressed nicely, clean. It is heartwarming!" You know, I liked that too.

There was a theater, we also had a theater, but compared to Pristina, no. There were plays based on scripts of world-famous writers, while there was something... somewhat more, more, more... there were no artists, there were no artists. The radio here was in Albanian. In Skopje, only the news and some sort of musical program was in Albanian, nothing else. And, since then, it seemed like... then the university opened and everything, it was progress, right? It wasn't important. People are willing to tolerate the muddy streets and suffer through building construction, yes, but you have to build human capacities too. There was a will for education, to open schools for higher education because that's what interested me...

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Did you go to the theater and cinema here? In the book you write about going to the theater and cinema?

**Ajten Pllana:** I loved the cinema from when I was a kid, if I could I would have slept there ... I would watch the same movie four or five times and I would know all the dialogue. I can memorize a lot. I remember everything from my childhood, and I really like it. Sometimes I would tell my family I'm going, sometimes I would find the money. Going to the cinema was very cheap, two dinars,<sup>23</sup> three dinars to get in, I would watch the movies.

I also went a lot to the cinema here with my husband, but we went more to the theater and to concerts. He wasn't a coffee shop person, he didn't... He didn't ever want to go to coffee shops. He didn't drink, he didn't smoke and he would say, "No..." But we went to the theater and concerts regularly. But when we would get out of the concert, he would say, "Well, my wife, now I wanna go to a coffee shop and drink coffee, I don't feel like going home after the concert." "Let's, let's..." I would say, "we have the children waiting at home." (Laughs) And this is how we rolled... every play in the theater, every concert, classical music, entertainment, folk. We attended regularly.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** In which halls?

**Ajten Pllana:** Usually in Kino Rinia, they were held in Kino Rinia, those small concerts, but not the children's concerts, they were held in *Shtëpia e Armatës* [Army's House of Culture], there was *Shtëpia e Armatës*. Then in the theater, it was this theater we have today. At that time, the stage was small, a small stage, the shows were held in the theater's hall, you know... where the foyer is, there they had

<sup>23</sup> Dinar was the Yugoslav currency. Now it is the basic monetary unit of Serbia.

the *Pjata e Drujtë* [The Wooden Plate], a very good play. We sat in a circle, there were a few of us and it didn't fit the audience. Then, concerts were held, the music chords... the Kosovo Chords festival. During that time the city would burst.

A week ahead of the festival my daughters would ask their father, "Dad, find some tickets for us, the other kids are going." "Where do I find them?" Sometimes we could find them, sometimes we couldn't. Usually they would be held in a bigger hall, it was like this. It was very lively, we would often come here from Skopje to see something. Skopje had them too, but not as many, no. The cultural life did not develop at the same level as Macedonia's, they had more professional staff and opportunities.

I remember when I was a child, I think I was in seventh grade when they started to build Skopje's National Minority Theater, which was built in the Bazaar. You know where Bit Bazaar is? There was the theater, but do you even wanna go there? The theater calls for a better place... the theater was in the Bazaar; the kiosks, the peppers, tomatoes were sold there. That's where the theater was, it doesn't make sense. Now they're renovating it for the second or third time, it looks good, but it is built in the Bazaar. It bothers me. That has bothered me from day one.

The Macedonian Theater is where it used to be, now that this [Nikola] Grujevski has renovated it, having spent billions. Imagine the stage curtain is from the same velvet as it used to be. I haven't been there, but my brothers who have been there told me. My sisters-in-law went there, they saw theater plays; and the chairs even, the same chairs, the same velvet, they only took it a floor higher and the entry is from the other side, not on the side it used to be. And so, they work wisely for their own people. Our people are not to blame since that was the location that was given to them.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Why didn't you study?

**Ajten Pllana:** Excuse me?

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Why didn't you study?

**Ajten Pllana:** Why didn't I study? How could I study? I got married, I had four children, I was working, I didn't have... My husband was very ambitious. Once he wanted to enroll me in university. He said, "You are good with languages, I'll enroll you in Yugoslav literature, it's needed in the Albanian classrooms." I said, "You can enroll me, I won't go. I don't have time to study, I can't go there without studying, I don't have time, I don't have time." But he was ambitious and enrolled me. I said, "Take the *indeks*,<sup>24</sup> you keep it because I'm not going." And I didn't go.

At some point, he enrolled me in French. I was very good at French in school, in *Normale*. Then my teacher used to say, "Only Ajten Gashi..." and I had a friend from another class, "Only Ajten and he can study French, no one else." There were four or five students there, and my friend was very smart, he did his PhD and studied French in Sorbonne. Ajten came here and had four children and work, but I was very devoted to my children, my daughters. I had to work hard. I wasn't able to study and take care of my family, and take care of my children [all at the same time].

<sup>24</sup> *Indeks* were personal booklets issued to students under the old university system. It was used both as a student ID and grade register. Indeks issued in the '90s had "Kosovo Republic" written on them. Very often Albanian students were mistreated by Serbian police if found with *indeks*.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** When did you retire?

**Ajten Pllana:** When did I retire, a long time ago, it's been 22 years.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** How did you feel about that? Because you spent a large part of your life in school.

**Ajten Pllana:** Well, it was hard at first. At 12:00, I always started class at 12:00. And at 12:00, I would go out and go from one side of the school to the other because I missed hearing the noise that the kids and teachers made. And one day, my daughter said to me, "Why are you going out, Mom?" My husband said, "She hasn't yelled in a long time, she misses it." I said, "Who yelled?" He said, "I heard your voice from there." (Laughs) I said, "You heard me?" He said, "Yes, but I didn't tell you." Like that. I missed it, you know, it wasn't easy. But I'm in contact with my students all the time.

Imagine two years ago, I was given a medal on Teacher's Day awarded by the municipality and after that I saw my students from the first generation at Emin Duraku Elementary School where I worked. They came up to me, "Teacher..." One that was very active, Naza Sejdiu, she organized a get-together that night to go to a coffee shop. And around twelve or fifteen students of that time, who are retired now, were there. I didn't recognize any of them except Naza. I went there, they... They came after I did, and they said, "Is this our teacher?" I said, "Yes." (Laughs)

All of them are grown adults now, and I asked, "Which ones were in our class?" I forgot their names, I only worked there for a year. Imagine, I found out there that Isa Mustafa was my student, the former Mayor, and I said, "Isa Mustafa was my student?" "Yes." They said, "Yes." I asked, "What kind of student was he?" They said, "Teacher, there was no better student. In elementary school, in high school, in university, he was great." I said, "Good, I am glad." You see most of the generations I taught now have retired.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** When did your husband pass away?

**Ajten Pllana:** What?

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** When did you husband pass away?

**Ajten Pllana:** On January 4, 1994, a long time ago.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** A very long time ago.

**Ajten Pllana:** Yeah, in his sleep. That night we stayed up til... It was the New Year and they [family] came, so, it was January 3, January 4, did I say January 4? My sister and her husband stayed here for a while. There was also the son and daughter of my brother from Skopje. They stayed til late and he [Ajten's husband] got up and took my sister and her husband home. They didn't have a car, [and left] around 12:00 a.m. We asked them to stay over, "We have room." My sister, "No, no, I can't," she says, "We'll go home." And he drove them home.

He returned. We stayed up for a while longer, and he gave me a massage. I said, "Give me a massage..." The children were laughing, they said, "She is making you work." He said, "Go to sleep." "Now..." he said, "Do you see, now she's even asking for a massage." We laughed at that. It was almost 1:00 a.m. when we went to sleep. He said, "I'll go sleep with your brother's son upstairs in the bedroom, and, in the morning bring me a cup of tea in bed." "Okay" I said. This nephew of mine was very devious, he

said, “A cup or two cups of tea?” “No, no,” he says, “only one.” “Uncle Gynsel,” referring to my brother, “he drinks two in bed.” “No...” he said, “I never drink tea, but I want a cup of tea tomorrow.” And the girl stayed here [with me].

This room is joined with the other, it’s a living room, but then we covered her and she slept there. I was sleeping here... in the morning, we got up and I told her, “Go upstairs and check if he’s up, so I can bring him the tea.” When she came downstairs, she was very pale. She said, “Aunty,” she said, “come and see, I think he is sleeping.” And immediately I knew what could have happened. When I went there, he had turned on Radio Tirana, it was 8:10. There was soft music playing... he was taking pills for his blood pressure and he hadn’t even touched them, they were still on the nightstand. His body was still warm, he had passed away, 63 years old.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** So young.

**Ajten Pllana:** Young, young, like this. My children were abroad. It was very hard, it was very hard, all four of my children were abroad. Then my son, who was in a very good high school, was learning. And my daughters were there, Vjollca and Arta. He [the son] came back, so he would not leave me alone, so like this.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Tell me about the book now. Please explain the journey you took to get your book published this year?

**Ajten Pllana:** Sometimes it seems so ridiculous that I published it. But I don’t know if I told you, I started writing my life stories, as I didn’t have much to do. I usually wake up very early in the morning. I’m a morning person. Around 4:00 or 3:00 am I’m awake and so I write. Once when my daughter in London called me, “What are you doing, Mom?” I said, “I’m writing.” “What are you writing?” I said, “I’m writing my childhood memories, I want to leave it to you to remember me by.” “And what are those?” I said, “Something like stories.”

I told Rron, my daughter’s son in America, that I was writing. Soon after he sent me a beautiful notebook, it is there, and inside there’s a postcard attached to it, in the notebook, and it says... He was born and raised there [in America], he speaks Albanian, but of course only a little. And he said, “Grandma, it’s a perfect plan,” he says, “the fact that you’re writing.” He also said something else. And I said, “I want to make Rron’s wish come true because he was happy I was doing it.” At the time, he was a recent graduate of the Academy of Music there. I said, “I shall write it”.

When Vjollca heard the first three stories, “Very beautiful, mom.” It was about the shoe left on the street, [a memory] from when I was two and a half years old... Now, I don’t remember that day entirely, but I remember the most important part. For me the most important part was that the shoe was on the street. And my mother said, “Leave it!” But I was just a child, instead of taking it, I left it there as my mother said, “Leave the shoe, run!” Planes were flying over, it was April ‘41. And I said, that is exactly how I started writing. Every morning, Vjollca in London asked me, “Mom, are you writing?” “Yes, yes.” “Read it to me.” And I read each one of them, “Very good mom, very interesting, very interesting.”

I said, “Vjollca, daughter...” “Come on, Mom, please write.” And the stories grew, every day I wrote one, two, and I didn’t know in which direction to head because I can remember like five hundred stories

from my life. And two years ago when I went [to London], she printed them. She said, “Mom, you know what? Let’s write, write a book.” I said to her, “Are you nuts?” I wrote about sixty years of my life. “Come on...” she says. Then I said, “These aren’t as...” “Very good...” she says, “and the style is somewhat great. It’s not... you don’t have literary aspirations, but it’s very interesting.” I was laughing. We were joking about publishing them and...

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Then?

**Ajten Pllana:** And then when she came here two years ago, no, last year, I had already started... One day came, what’s her name, Flaka Surroi,<sup>25</sup> she came to drink coffee downstairs and my daughter, Arta, had told her. She said, “You know what, my mother is writing some stories.” “Let me see them”. I showed her, she read the first one and said, “Very good, teacher.” Because she was a pupil at our school. She said, “Continue.” Now my daughter has more courage, you know, and more will, “Finish whatever else you have, Mom, whatever seems more interesting.” Until there were 72, “You know what?” She said, “80 stories, 80 years old, I will celebrate it and make it so it is published on your birthday.” “Vjollca, are you crazy?” I started panicking, “Mom, they’re very interesting.” And that’s how it happened.

Then she sent it to Flaka, the first mock-up print that she did, and she said, “Look at it!” She said, “It’s a special book.” She really, really liked it. Then, of course, it has to undergo editing, I’m not a philologist, nor a linguist... and then the second time when I gave it to her, she said, she appreciated it and liked it. And she said, “It can be published. We will publish it.” That’s how the book got published. I was surprised (laughs). It’s all because of my daughter. She is very determined, very determined and she says, “The book is a gift for your 80th birthday.” We published it with our own money, not like that... and it was published.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** A lot of people have read the book, what are the comments?

**Ajten Pllana:** What?

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** A lot of people have read the book...

**Ajten Pllana:** Well, how do I know, me... Some people like the stories from childhood a lot. They mention some from school, about our life, about my father’s imprisonment. Then, what is really interesting, the exodus of Albanians to Turkey. My daughter was really impressed, especially with the excursion story, I don’t know if you have read it?

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Yes.

**Ajten Pllana:** As it seems that was organized on purpose [the exodus of Albanians to Turkey] because there was a time when it stopped for a while. We didn’t have access, we couldn’t go to Turkey. We weren’t allowed to go and not come back, not as a tourist. We didn’t know what it was, what it offered, what Turkey brings about. And when the bus went there and when it came back, and it traveled through the most beautiful places. Turkey had beautiful places, but they didn’t take them to see the poverty, the unemployment... 60 years ago Turkey was very different, it’s nothing like today.

---

<sup>25</sup> Flaka Surroi (1964) is a notable Kosovo-Albanian publisher. She comes from the family of Kosovo politician and diplomat Rexhai Surroi, and is a sibling of Veton Surroi, a Kosovan politician.

And then there, my brother, when my dad one day, maybe you read this story, one day my father was fed up {touches her nose}. My dad got out of prison, but knew we were always watched. He said, "You know what?" And he went to the [Turkish] Embassy, though there wasn't one, it was the Turkish Consulate and asked... And he presented the letter of support that a friend had sent to him. They asked him, "What are you, Turkish or Albanian?" "No," he says, "Albanian," he says, "a proud Albanian even." "Albanian, you stay here." They said, "You can't go to Turkey." And when my older brother Amiri found out, who still hadn't been imprisoned, he got very mad. He said, "Whom did you ask? Whom? We're not leaving, we will stay in front of their noses. We're not leaving." And, in our neighborhood, only our family stayed. The Macedonians came and bought houses and so on. We never left.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Why were they going to Turkey?

**Ajten Pllana:** What?

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Why were they going...

**Ajten Pllana:** Why were they going to Turkey? Well, a better life was offered to them... and look, now I see our people writing in newspapers and stuff. Albania wasn't opening schools for Albanians in Turkey. They weren't because every day, not a month went by that some leader from Turkey didn't come once to Skopje and Belgrade. Especially Fuad Koprulu, he was the Minister of Foreign Affairs or something, he visited often. And you couldn't request to reside in Turkey unless someone sent you a support letter and you yourself had to declare at the Embassy, at, at the Consulate that you were Turkish, not that you were Albanian.

All of that was all orchestrated because if they declared themselves Albanian, one day they would ask for their rights and schools and other stuff. So when people ask for schools today, it's in vain. Why aren't there schools in the Albanian language? Because you presented yourself as Turkish, they won't give you schools in Albanian. Those were things that whoever thought them through would not leave. Even though our people were found, most of them, I mean lately the first [emigre] generations, they couldn't get an education. Rarely, they found employment. It was a struggle for survival, but now they have achieved a lot.

My sister-in-law went with eight of her children. My nephews left and don't dare ask me how they turned out. They are getting an education and all, but they have lost their identity. Only the older generation are left [with some knowledge of Albanian], like the son and daughter of my sister-in-law. They speak Albanian among themselves, the rest speak Turkish. That's how it was, those who thought about it more endured that hard life at that time, you know, to not leave the country. Also, there was no awareness, you know, mostly people were uneducated, not calculating, not envisioning the future. Right, so it was like this.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** What did you learn in your 80 years of life?

**Ajten Pllana:** What?

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** What did you learn in your 80 years of life??

**Ajten Pllana:** Ooh, what I learned, what I learned. Many things (laughs) I learned even through 80 years, 80 (laughs) years of life. To know how to fight for life. If you can, but I'm not a fighter, I'm not like



that, and sometimes I think if I had studied more, and if I had that, but again it's good like this too, right. What else, nothing more concrete than what I was able to achieve, no. I think I'm content with the profession that I chose. I think it's one of the most noble professions, most valuable even although some, some don't appreciate it. But being a teacher, working to enlighten three hundred or more kids, it's something big, something valuable and so on.

Then my kids have achieved a lot, we live a normal life, nothing more. We don't have megalomaniacal goals to get rich; normal, just a normal life how an intellectual can live it, like this. I traveled the world enough, there, there I saw, I... It could be better, better things could have happened, but I'm not preoccupied, I'm content.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** From your close family, your sisters and brothers, who is left?

**Ajten Pllana:** I have a brother, a sister, and two brothers that are now both retired. I have their picture in the book. Even the youngest one has retired. He was a journ... albanologist, he worked as a journalist at the Pristina Radio Television. His wife is also an albanologist-journalist, but, when the television station closed, they had to go back to Skopje. They had their children here, two children, and another girl there. So my brother retired a year ago. They took their first steps in Pristina and they have a very nice family.

The other brother that is alive, he is a lawyer and retired. He translates a lot of books of value from Turkish into Macedonian and from Macedonian into Turkish. My big brother, he was the backbone of the family, he died when he was 64, 74 years old. He was a lawyer, he was a political prisoner. The other one was the cyclist, he also died four or five years ago. When I go there [to Skopje], I miss my brothers... Because we, my father didn't have siblings, my mother was from Presevo living in Skopje. So we didn't have relatives there.

My father had an old uncle with a daughter and he died in '54, he didn't leave, he only left his daughter behind. And she later got married and studied French. We were very lonely in Skopje, to say, like a single tree in the desert. But the family expanded with all the children, and now the children of the children, and so on. I go there, they come here to visit, and life goes on.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Once more, so it is more accurate. You were born in 1938, right?

**Ajten Pllana:** '38, yes.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** Okay, thank you so much, it was a pleasure talking to you.

**Ajten Pllana:** Thank you for the time and interest.

**Kaltrina Krasniqi:** It was so much fun, it was so much fun, thank you so much.

**Ajten Pllana:** Really? Thank you, thank you.