

Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH ILIR BYTYQI

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Duration: 53 minutes

Present:

1. Ilir Bytyqi (Speaker)
2. Anna Di Lellio (Interviewer/ Camera)

Transcription notation symbols of nonverbal 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

Anna Di Lellio: Can you please tell us your name and something about your family?

Ilir Bytyqi: My name is Ilir Bytyqi, I am 46 years old. I'm an executive chef in a country club. My family are Albanian, Albanian immigrants from Kosovo. They emigrated to the US in the early 70s, you might wanna...

Anna Di Lellio: From where?

Ilir Bytyqi: Oh, from Kosovo, from Prizren, from the town of Prizren.

Anna Di Lellio: Why did they come to US?

Ilir Bytyqi: Well, they came... first of all they came to the US for a better life, you know, and flee the atrocities that had been happening in Kosovo. Because during the war in 1999... it wasn't just that, Serbs were always harassing, killing, mistreating Albanians, you know, since earlier, [since] 1912. So, they came to America for a better life, a better future.

Anna Di Lellio: Did they have any children?

Ilir Bytyqi: Ah yes, they did, they had my older brother Enver, and my sister Bukuria. They were, at the time, my brother was, at the time, I believe, two years old, my sister was about a year and a half I think, a year, I'm not one hundred percent sure, at the time. They emigrated in 1969, I mean, 1970, I'm sorry. So... They came for a better... you know, they were young. And then my dad worked as a mechanic, a diplomatic engineer,¹ he was a very successful diplomatic engineer.

In '71 they had my sister, and then they were here in rural Illinois, actually in Illinois, the state of Illinois, when they emigrated from... actually they were in Italy, in Trieste, at the time, when they

¹ With a diploma, graduated from engineering high school.

emigrated to the US. In '73 I was born, and after that, two years later, we had my brother, one of my brothers, Ylli, may he rest in peace, he was born in '74. '76, Agron was born. Two years later Mehmet was born, in '78. Then Fatos, my younger brother was born in 1979.

We grew up in the US most of our lives. We were about six or seven years old when we went to Ko... to live in Kosovo. And we lived in Kosovo about 14 years and then we came back to the US in the early '90s. I believe it was 1993 when we came back, and I worked as a chef... I started as a cook in the kitchen. Ylli, my brother, was a pizza man. My brothers Mehmet and Agron, they were construction workers... which... they were doing really well at the time.

And during the '90s we start hearing all the... before, before we emigrated to the US. We came back to the US, not emigrated. There were a lot of happenings, demonstrations, mistreatment of Albanian people in Kosovo, really, it was really bad, really bad, really bad. People were taken in the middle of the night, some neighbors of ours. They, Serbs, come and take them, and they just disappeared, nobody knows their whereabouts... until this day. Some of them...families don't know their whereabouts.

And as I said, there were demonstrations, we participated in demonstrations at the time in Kosovo. And then it was time for us to flee because we were, our lives were in danger because we were Americans. And during the '90s, I think it was '92 or '93, we left Kosovo, we came to New York, to Chicago actually, where we met our dad, and then we came all together to New York, we've been living in New York ever since.

And then come the 1990s, '98, '99, we start seeing what was happening, really happening. The mistreatment of Albanians in Kosovo was brewing very badly... and people fleeing left and right, some to Albania, some to Macedonia, even to America, they were emigrating. So we start seeing on TV people being killed in villages, these were our friends, some of them friends of ours... and the mistreatment, the rapes, and one day we decided, the American Albanian community actually, the *Vendlindja Thërret* [Homeland Calling], they formed the Kosovo Liberation Army here, the Atlantic Brigade.

And we saw that and then we got together with my, my brothers and myself, and my dad, we sat down and spoke. You know, we couldn't stand it anymore because at the time we had our mom, my brother Fatos and my sister... they were in Kosovo during the war. And we sat down with our dad and we said, "Listen, we got to do something about this, because we can't stand... " You know, we don't know... at the time we didn't know what was going on with them, we don't know if they were alive or dead.

Anna Di Lellio: May I ask you why did you... you went back to Kosovo, your family went back to Kosovo twice, right? They went back in '78.

Ilir Bytyqi: '79.

Anna Di Lellio: In '79, and then your mother and some of your siblings were again in Kosovo in '99?

Ilir Bytyqi: Yes, they were in Kosovo in '99.

Anna Di Lellio: They were living there or they were visiting?

Ilir Bytyqi: No, they were living there.

Anna Di Lellio: May I ask you if...why?

Ilir Bytyqi: Well, my mom had family members, you know, she didn't have anybody here in the US she was all alone with us kids and her husband, my dad. And they decided, she's like, "We want to go visit family." You know what I mean, she went to visit family and you what I mean, and at the time her mother, sisters, you know, as I said, there was nobody [in the US], she was an {makes air quotes} "Albanian emigrant" in the US, which she loves, the US today, she's a proud American. And she decided to stay there, you know, with her family, you know what I mean, close to her family. She was here about ten years actually, before she went back to Kosovo, to live in Kosovo.

Anna Di Lellio: Do you have any memories of growing up, you know, you grew up here, you lived here, as a young man or a child, and then also in Kosovo. What was it, how was it for you?

Ilir Bytyqi: Well, life was good, you know, I believe as any middle-class family, you know, it was, it wasn't easy, it was hard. I started working when I was eight, nine years old, you know what I mean, like, a shopping boy, you know what I mean? I go knock on my neighbor's door, I'll see if you need milk, "Go get me bread." You know what I mean? As a young kid, you know. Trying to make a buck, you know.

And same thing with my brothers, and whatchamacallit²... It was good, people were close before, you know, before the war, Albanians are very hostable [sic] people, you, and they hosted very good, you know what I mean. Every night you have to be, go some... you know, over somebody's house, you know what I mean, it was very, very exciting.

We finished school while we were there, you know, it was pretty, pretty good. Life was good, you know, you know. Okay, we weren't rich or anything, we were middle-class, you know what I mean. Between middle-class and poor, you know what I mean. But you know, seven siblings, you know, it was, it was, there wasn't... It wasn't easy, you know, but it was good.

Anna Di Lellio: What did you like best? The US or Kosovo?

Ilir Bytyqi: I am born American, so definitely my blood runs in Albania, but I'm definitely American, American born.

² American idiom, a word used when the actual name of the object in question does not come to mind.

Anna Di Lellio: It wasn't the same for your brothers Agron, Ylli and Mehmet?

Ilir Bytyqi: Yes, yes definitely. Actually that proves it, when the call came for... the American Albanian community gathered up here in the US and that proves it, that, they were the first ones to... we were all first to jump in and "Go!" you know what I mean. Going back to that, in the 1990s, '99, when they, the massacres and rapes and killings were happening, we saw it all over TV, and on the news, and you know reports were coming in, and it was just like unbelievable. But we were like, you know what I mean? sat down talked with my dad and said, "We gotta to do something about it..." We wanted all to join in, you know.

But we decided, we were talking with my dad, and it was like, we have... somebody has to stay behind. Not even my dad, my dad, we left our dad on the side, you know, he wanted to go to fight too, which we were, from the brothers, we were like, "No, I'm going, you..." He's like, "No, I'm going, you stay..." You know what I mean. Then suddenly, whatever, we put, put to... short. And I got, I drew twice the short stick. Once I drew the short stick twice, we weren't waiting for the third time, everybody is like, "That's it, it's all... all settled, you stay." I was like, "No, no, you guys..." "One of you has to stay, I am the oldest," you know, like...

They weren't taking... didn't take "No" for an answer so they gathered up, got everything, went and registered, you know, for the thing, for the... to go over to fight. And they fought, you know what I mean, they were, you know, they weren't afraid, you know they, they were proud to go and do this, you call it humanitarian aid, you know, humanitarian aid. You know, and that's what they were doing, aiding, doing a humanitarian aid to people when they were caught and killed, got killed, you know, transferred to... tortured and killed, you know.

Anna Di Lellio: Do you remember the day they left?

Ilir Bytyqi: Yes, I do. It was a very emotional day, very emotional day. I told them, you know, "I expect you guys to come back," you know, "be safe." Now, unfortunately... I don't know... They came back, but not alive.

Anna Di Lellio: Yeah, and when did they, when they left, how did you stay in touch with them?

Ilir Bytyqi: Through phone calls, through Tirana, they went to Albania, you know, they called me every couple of days after they were, you know, had a break, you know what I mean. And at the time, I one day get a phone call and they tell me that my mom, my mom, my mom, [a call] from my brothers, telling me that they met with my brothers and that the family is safe there in Albania: my mom, Fatos and my sister, and that was a relief, you know. I was like, "Oh good, great!" You know what I mean, because believe it or not for... The last time I saw my mom, sister and Fatos, it was in '98, I think it was March '98. And from that we didn't know what was going on. The phone lines were cut off and nothing. So, it was like, it was a relief that we, my parents.. my mom, sister and brother Fatos were okay, safe in Albania.

But whatchamacallit, afterwards the war ended, my parents returned to Kosovo, my mom returned to Kosovo and my brother and sister, and my brothers went in, with the Kosovo Liberation Army in Kosovo and whatchamacallit, and after the signing of the treaty, the Kumanova treaty, they... The Detr... The agreement, my brothers decided to stay for the rebuilding of Kosovo, you know what I mean.

After they met with my mom and my brothers, with my family in Albania, whatchamacallit, they had to go back into the war, but my parents, when after the war it was over, my parents, my mom, my family went back to Kosovo. So did my brothers, after the war was ended, and the Kumanova treaty was signed, and my brothers decided to stay in Kosovo, you know, to help with the rehabilit...rebuilding of Kosovo. And during the war, the Roman [Roma] family that we... assisted my family, my parents, my mom, my family, took care of my parents, you know what I mean, made sure that whatever they needed... Because Albanians couldn't go out much, you know what I mean, during the night they had, during the day, even during the day they had to cover their windows with blankets, so this way you don't see what's going on or you know...

And the Roman [Roma] family was one of the families that helped my parents, you know what I mean, go shopping, you know anything that they needed to do. Also if you went to the bakery you waited on the line for three-four hours for a loaf of bread. But the Roman [Roma] family went and you know they got in and out, no problem. And after the war was over, before that, my brothers were televised when they arrived in Albania, whatchamacallit, they were part of the Kosovo Liberation Army and when the... A couple of days, a day later Serbs found out that my brothers... What happened with Serbs is, Serbian forces, once they found out that a member of the Kosovo Liberation Army, family, they know where, they know, one person they know that he is in the Kosovo Liberation Army and they know that families... The next day, or probably that night they go and execute the whole family, as a kind of revenge towards Albanians in Kosovo.

So my brothers were seen on TV by my neighbors, by my aunts, uncles, and they were like, "Listen, we've seen them on TV..." My mom tried to deny it because she knew if they found out who they are, you know, who they are, they'd be executed. But next day one of the neighbor's overheard the police officers talking about my parents' apartment, telling them that is the apartment of the guys, you know from TV, the Kosovo Liberation Army guys, this is the apartment. And then the neighbor goes and tells my mom, "Listen, you have to leave." It was about 10 o'clock in the morning, tells my mom, "You have to leave." And my mom's like, "Why?" "Because these guys are gonna come, they know who you are, whose parents are you, so they will probably come and execute you."

So what happens that day, my mom had the room... another neighbor, because we were the same last name, the same guy, the neighbor that came has the last name, the Bytyqi name, last name, he came and told my mom, "Please, take my family too, so this way there's no misunderstanding between the families." So what happens is, us, the family, and the other Bytyqi family, and the Romans [Roma] escorted us to the bus station. We went into the bus station, took the bus and headed down to the Albanian border.

So my parents, thank God, without no incident they passed through. But they were, there was, I've heard that there was, there were reports that the belongings of people were being...before they were leaving Albania, their IDs were being taken, they've been robbed blindly, if they caught a young woman or... they'd rape her, you know what I mean. And then one report... there was Drini, there's a river called Drini, and one of the guys reported that there was a young girl floating on it, all bloody, after, I guess, they must have raped her and just threw her there and killed her.

So after the war ended the Roma family needed, needed help, being protected from, you know... because believe it or not, listen, if you were Roma you were known that yes, you work with Serbs, which most of them did, you know, they worked with Serbs and all that. But you know there were good families that helped and kept it to themselves, you know what I mean. And these are one of the guys that helped my family flee.

So when the war was over, they asked my brothers if they would do a kindness to just escort them towards, towards the border and then they would just leave. But I guess when they escorted my... my brothers escorted this Roma family, at the time there were no border visuals, you know, nobody knew where the border begins, where it ends and it was just... When they were caught, from reports that we know, about eight kilometers into Serbia, so they were pulled over by Serbian forces and kidnapped... They were persecuted for 15 days for {makes air quotes} "illegally entering" Yugoslavia at the time. But they were released in eleven days on good behavior.

Anna Di Lellio: Did you know that, that was happening to them...you were here, right?

Ilir Bytyqi: Yes, we were here. We didn't know at first, we didn't know what was going on after they were arrested and taken to prison, the Roman [Roma] family assisted, called us and told us that, "This is what is happening, what's going on and they had been arrested, they're in prison, but we'll keep an eye on it and make sure they're being released. Once they get released, we'll make sure that they'll send them back and we'll make sure they're coming to Kosovo, so this way you guys could meet up."

But unfortunately they were released in eleven days on good behavior, and one of the Roman [Roma] family went to the prison to wait for them, you know, he waited for a long time and then he goes and says, "Listen, you guys told me that they're being released today, where are they?" They're like, "No, no, don't worry about them, we already released them, they are already being taken to the border and sent to..." You know, he's like, "Well, you should have said something, I came in the morning and you guys told they're being released soon." And he's like, "No, don't worry about it, we took care of that, so you don't have to go, for your safety."

And whatchamacallit, that guy calls and says, "Listen, they were released, did you guys meet up with them?" And my family, my brother is like, "No." But instead of taking my brothers back to Kosovo where they came in, international law is wherever you took them that's where you gotta return them, they took them at the other end of Serbia, to Petrovosella [Petrovo Selo] near the border with Hungary where was the {makes air quotes} "training camp." And they were brutally tortured, they

were brutally tortured and then executed, and they were dumped in a mass grave where there were contained about another 70 Albanian remains.

Anna Di Lellio: How did you find out what happened to them? Where were you? Where you already in Kosovo or...

Ilir Bytyqi: No, I was here in the US, Fatos was in Kosova at the time, running the investigation, of course with the US authorities and with the US Embassy, unfortunately. Well, we, for two years we didn't know where they were at, we thought they were in prison, we had numerous meetings, they said, "No, nothing to worry about, but Serbian officials..." They said...I had a few meetings with Serbian officials between 2000 and... 1999-200, and they said, "There is nothing to worry about, they're probably in prison, nothing to stress out, they'll be released, believe me, you know, being in KLA, you know, they're fine, nothing to worry about."

And then at the time, the Prime Minister, the Minister of the Interior started looking, he was there at the time, 2001 when the bodies were discovered and the mass grave in Petrovosella, he was the one that said there were three Americans, they identified them by the court's paperwork that they were my brothers, they were in the pocket after they were sent out to be executed, they had them as identification purposes {makes air quotes}. And Sreten Lukić³ said himself at the time they were killed because they were Americans, the reason why they were killed was they joined the bombing of the 1999... the NATO bombing. America bombed Serbia, it was kind of revenge, a terrorist act.

Anna Di Lellio: And how was it? When they didn't come back, when they were not released from jail, you got the news, you're in Kosovo. I mean, we do know what happened to your family, they were devastated, how did, how did that work? Did you stop working, you kept working, you started investigating...

Ilir Bytyqi: As I said, we were trying to investigate the whole thing and we were working here, Fatos was at the time in Europe doing things, and then we were going back and forth, we made almost, almost over... for the past twenty years probably I can say good, good, good 50, 60, 70 trips to Serbia, long. And we're trying to find out what happened and the investigation from, from our point of view, which is, it's been done and it is proven that people who are responsible for killing my brothers... but Serbia chooses not to prosecute them because they're in the... First of all the investigation's all done, as I said...

Anna Di Lellio: Who did it?

Ilir Bytyqi: The prosecutors, the FBI and every branch of the Serbian government, it's been concrete, that the case is done, they know who the perpetrator is, at the time Prime Minister Vučić came in and

³ Sreten Lukić (1955) was the head of the Serbian police in Kosovo during the war and afterwards he became the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs in Serbia. Arrested and transferred to The Hague in 2005, he was found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity in 2009 by the Trial Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

told us, my brother, the US officials that, he said to our... in front of our attorney, to everybody, there was about ten, ten, ten of us in the room, told us that two people were responsible for it, one of them named Goran,⁴ said Guri, and the other one I can't say anything yet because we aren't one hundred percent sure if it's, you know... but he named two people, one of them was Goran, called Guri, he was the one, he told us straight out that he was the one who killed my brothers.

So whatchamacallit, he knew exactly, for the Prime Minister to come out and say it... and then a couple of years later he said, "The family is threatening, is threatening me and kicking me over the head," that we are...the proof is in the pudding, you know who did it, how it happened and today, this day, the person, Goran, Guri that is, he is responsible for killing my brothers, he is in the President's political party, he's high up in the presidential political party, he's one of the board members of President Vučić, and he chooses not to give him up.

Part Two

Anna Di Lellio: When did you get the bodies of your brothers?

Ilir Bytyqi: Well, the remains of my brothers were transferred from Serbia in 2002, in 2002, in, I believe it was in... March. And there was a big ceremony in Pristina, in Sheshi, in Skanderbeu,⁵ I think. It was, it was a big ceremony for them, honoring them as, you know, as fighters, heroes of Kosovo. They went for a cause, to help people who couldn't help themselves, you know. They did a humanitarian deed, they didn't do any crime, you know what I mean, you do a humanitarian deed all over the world people recognize you as a humanitarian, you know what I mean... They award you, you know what I mean, with a humanitarian decoration or... But instead of awarding them for, you know, doing a humanitarian deed, they were death sentenced.

So, it's ridiculous, it's ridiculous that Serbia hasn't, you know, to this day it doesn't, it doesn't, it doesn't care, doesn't care. And this is a country that {makes air quotes} "is trying to go into the EU" and then you have... Believe it or not the EU does know exactly Serbia's plan, you know, every... the Humanitarian Law Center, the Humanitarian Law Center in Belgrade, Amnesty International, you have... Everybody knows as far as... what really Serbia is all about.

Anna Di Lellio: Have you been fighting this fight all alone or people are helping you?

Ilir Bytyqi: No, we had, in the beginning we had, we had the US government help us, but the US government can't do much. They also have to protect their own political interests. But, we had the American Albanian community, we had family members here in Europe, you know we had a lot, a lot,

⁴ Goran Radosavljević, a.k.a Guri (1957), Serbian police leader and during the war head of the special anti-terrorist forces called Operational Group and of the police training camp of Petrovo Selo, where a mass grave was discovered after the war. Since 2014, he is a member of the Executive Board of the Serbian Progressive Party.

⁵ Square with the statue of Skanderbeg.

and we had former members of the US government, employees helping us, like ambassador Bob Barry, Tanya Domi. We have a lot, we have a lot, you know, assisting us with...

As I said the American Albanian community is helping us, assisting us. We have the full support of the Kosovo government, you know, so it's just the will and power of Serbia to, to, to do, to bring justice. Not only my family, there's almost 1500 people who are missing, there's 1500 more other people, it's not only my family that is suffering, you know, and there's a lot more. And Serbia chooses not to acknowledge it. And Serbia acknowledged war crimes, only that were committed against Serbs, they will not acknowledge the ones that were committed against Albanians. It's like, "Look what I've suffered, not you." You know what I mean. "What about me?"

Anna Di Lellio: And do you have any help in Serbia? When you go to Serbia, who...?

Ilir Bytyqi: Yes, we do, we do, the Humanitarian Law Center and... Also by the way, we have the Helsinki Commission, the staff at the Helsinki Commission has been great helping us. We have the congressional... Congressman [Eliot] Engel, we have a lot, a lot, a lot. We have members of Congress, everybody... Just recently we, I was in DC and testified and it was just, it was just, how should I put it? I'm thankful for the US government's congressional district, the Senate too, you know, assisting on this matter, to shed light.

We have also the... speaking about, in Serbia the Humanitarian Law Center, they've been bending backwards, not only for my family, but also for other Albanian families. But as I said, it's the Serbian will, the Serbian government's will to shed light in these deaths and these horrific crimes that were committed by Serbian forces.

Anna Di Lellio: You have a lot of memories of your brothers, can you tell us? We always... you're talking of course about them as the three brothers who went, fought, then helped someone who needed help and then they were brutally killed, unlawfully killed. What were like? Agron, Agron was the oldest, right?

Ilir Bytyqi: No, Ylli was...

Anna Di Lellio: Ylli was the oldest...

Ilir Bytyqi: Agron was the second, Mehmet was the youngest one of the three. They were fun, outgoing, you know. They'd do anything for a person, believe it or not. They were very outgoing, very respectful, you know, even people in our town, in Hampton Bay said... they were like, "What? This is what happened to them?" They were shocked about it, you know, they're shocked. A lot of people are shocked, you know what I mean? My brothers were always, always there for somebody... Today, this day, we have friends of them that call and check up on us, you know what I mean, you know. Then we talk about what they did here, they did there...

They were outgoing, on weekends they'd go out, they won't be all by themselves, they'll call friends and you know what I mean, and they were very, very outgoing, outspoken, out... You know, loved life, you know what I mean? as everybody does, you know what I mean?

Anna Di Lellio: Yeah. Who, who worked in a pizza place?

Ilir Bytyqi: Ylli.

Anna Di Lellio: Ylli. Did you like his pizza?

Ilir Bytyqi: Oh loved it, he did great pizza, very good pizza, very good pizza, very good. Agron and Mehmet, they were construction workers. They were the greatest, you know? Their bosses, they were like, "We can't find better workers than these." You know, they were very hard-working American Albanians. They had a goal, they wanted a better life for themselves, you know, as our parents wanted, you know, when they emigrated in the '70s, you know, to have a better future, you know what I mean? for us, and that's what they wanted, you know, they wanted a better future and they didn't, you know... They had good times, you know. They had fun, I mean, they worked, and they had their fun, they had their rest, you know what I mean. It's like eight hours of work, but actually there's no such thing as eight hours of work, it's more ten, twelve hours a day. But they had their fun when they had their fun, they had their fun.

They enjoyed life you know, they'd always come and be like, "Oh, you're a party spoiler." I'm like, "Oh, you know, listen..." I was a chef at the time, and the restaurant that I worked for it was very busy, and me at the time, I didn't have time for anything, believe it or not. And they always would call me, "Come on out, come on out..." But when I went out with them, we had a blast, we had a blast, you know. The nightclubs, you know, out here in the city, they were full of life, full of life, you know, full of life, you know. They were always giving, always, you know, donating to charities, to people in need, they were very, very good, very good, very cool brothers, you know. And I was proud to have them.

Anna Di Lellio: They were very young, were they engaged?

Ilir Bytyqi: No, they weren't engaged, they were single, single. They were bachelors, they were bachelors, yeah. High on life, enjoyed life. They would have settled down, engaged but...

Anna Di Lellio: Yeah, later. Were you already married at the time?

Ilir Bytyqi: No, no, no. I was single too, I was single too. We all had girlfriends, girls... Excuse me. We all had girlfriends, you know what I mean? you know, but nothing serious. It was... having a partner in life is always important, being married, engaged, but no, no. We were looking into getting, you know, situated and all that stuff, but then the war happened and then ever since just... yeah.

Anna Di Lellio: When did you get married?

Ilir Bytyqi: I got married when I was about 29, I think, 28.

Anna Di Lellio: After the war?

Ilir Bytyqi: After the war, yes. In 2001 actually. It was three months before my brothers were discovered that were dead, in a mass grave, you know. Yes..... It was really bad. And we had hoped that they will be alive, you know, they'll be released. But after I got married, and three months later, I believe three months later, or four months, four months, {to himself} March, April, May, June... Four months later they were found executed in a mass grave.

Anna Di Lellio: And do you have children now?

Ilir Bytyqi: Yes, I do. I have two, I have twins, a boy and a girl, yes. I have named him, my son, Agron, after my brother Agron. My brother Fatos had named his son Mehmet, after Mehmet. And my older brother in Germany, ha has named his son Ylli so you know...

Anna Di Lellio: They live on.

Ilir Bytyqi: They live on.

Anna Di Lellio: Do you talk to your children... I don't know how old your children are, but they are old enough to know their story? They've grown up probably with the story.

Ilir Bytyqi: They're eleven years, they'll be eleven in June, July actually, they'll be eleven in July. They've seen it lately, when they were young like five, six, seven years they've looked into it, but they're not, you know what I mean, cartoons, and all that stuff, you know. But now that they're starting to really get into life, and they see what is going on, you what I mean. My son once asked me, "Dad, these people are bad, Serbs are bad." I'm like, "No, no son, Serbs are not bad, it's the government, and the criminals who run the government, you know what I mean? People who choose to be bad, to do bad, to inflict pain. All Serbs are not bad." You know what I mean? Not all Albanians...Albanians are not, you know... If you wanna delete that, you can delete it, if you're not...

But, you gotta give people a chance, you know what I mean. Serbs are, at this day their nationalism, like racism...In Serbia it's one thing if... Like Nazis, like Nazis did to the Jewish [sic], you know, they robbed them, they killed them, they raped them, and nobody is answering for it today. There's no justice, there is justice but very slightly. Bosnia, same thing happened in Bosnia, same thing happened in Croatia. It's unbelievable, it's unbelievable, who inflicted all this pain? Serbia. Just recently the Serbian president came out and praised Milošević as a great leader. That means...You're not... I guess if you praise a butcher that much, that, well, that means that you're not far away, you are following his path, I guess, you're not heading into a different direction. That means if tomorrow Serbia goes into war with let's say another country, that's what's gonna happen, same thing.

Anna Di Lellio: Now your brothers are in Yonkers, right? In a cemetery in Yonkers.

Ilir Bytyqi: Yes, they are in Saint Mary's Cemetery in Yonkers.

Anna Di Lellio: Can you tell us a little bit more about them, because you live in Long Island, your family...

Ilir Bytyqi: Yes, yes...

Anna Di Lellio: Do you live with your parents? Or your parents live with you?

Ilir Bytyqi: Yes, I do.

Anna Di Lellio: Because you're the oldest ?

Ilir Bytyqi: Yes, I am the oldest, yeah. Well the reason why my brothers were buried in Yonkers is because that's the place where they left from, when the Kosovo Liberation Army, the Atlantic Brigade was formed. So, it was from where they left, that's where they'll be buried kind of thing. And they decided to put them in Yonkers at the cemetery.

Anna Di Lellio: It is far from your home, right?

Ilir Bytyqi: Yeah, but we go visit them often, my parents go visit them often, they do, we do. You know, the members of the American Albanian community visit them all the time, because every time we go there, there's been like fresh flowers put in about three-four days, five days prior, you know what I mean. And it is very nice to know that, you know, they're been visited. Not only by the family but by the whole American Albanian community.

Anna Di Lellio: Do you think you're ever gonna get justice?

Ilir Bytyqi: Well, we for sure, we will. I'm confident that we will, we have every branch of, of the US government on it. We have the congressional, we have the Senate, we have, you know, the community, you know what I mean. We gotta be thankful to the American Albanian community, they've been very, very, very influential you know, assisting the family in each and as many ways they can.

Anna Di Lellio: Do you have any particular memory of your brothers, or one of them, or some little story that you can tell us?

Ilir Bytyqi: Which ones? Good ones, bad ones (laughs).

Anna Di Lellio: Oh well...

Ilir Bytyqi: The good one is... They enjoyed soccer, we enjoyed soccer, we enjoyed sports, you know. We used to play and we used to go actually to this river called Drini, and we used to go out, you know, picnic, and enjoy life, you know what I mean. It was this, you know, it was, they were full of life, you know what I mean, full of life. They always helped, like one instance we were driving... this before they went to war, here in New York, in Long Island. It was pouring rain, and I mean it was pouring, you couldn't see two feet in front of you. And there were two elderly, elderly gentlemen and a lady, I believe it was an Oldsmobile, they had an Oldsmobile, and from the rain, I guess, they must have hit a puddle and the car shut down, and the guy just had the flash lights going on. And there was nobody in the street, and we were going out to 7/11 to pick up a cup of coffee.

And all of the sudden my brothers are like, "Stop, stop, stop!" I'm like, "What's going on?" And not knowing that there was a cop car about a quarter of a mile, right in the middle of the stoplight I made a U-turn. He was like, "Make a U-turn, let's see what's going on." I'm like, "Leave them alone, you never know what's going on, you know, you might get in trouble, you trying to help people, you might get in trouble. This is America. Relax." And, "No, no, let's turn around." "Okay."

We're pulling up and go up front and we go knock on the... I mean it was pouring, I mean you couldn't see two feet in front of you and these elderly people, like, "Oh my car stalled and I can't start..." Ok. We popped the hood and all of the sudden the cop comes out, I'm like, "Oh we're gonna get a ticket now, this is gonna happen." And then I had the jumping cables, and we jumped it up, they started up, we made sure, we follow them through... The cop pulled up, put the lights on, he was like, "What's going on?" We were like, "These guys got stuck and..." And I thought we're gonna get a ticket, but he said, "No, thank you very much guys for doing it, you know, a humanitarian deed, thank you." I'm like, "Oh great, I'll take the ticket before..." He said, "No, no, thank you very much for helping..." I'm like, "They got stuck, what do you want me to do?" He's like, "No, no thank you very much." He thanked us... The elderly just went on.

It is, as I said, my brothers were full of life, full of goodness, you know what I mean? full of goodness. They'd never know how to inflict pain or harm to anybody, you know what I mean, they were good-hearted people, you know, very good-hearted people.

Anna Di Lellio: Did you ever get mad at them? Because you're the oldest, are you?

Ilir Bytyqi: As, as... Of course you get mad, you disagree, you agree to disagree, you know what I mean. But it was like in the moment, you know what I mean? We're mad at each other right there and you know, for stupidity (smiles). "No, I'm doing this, I'm gonna do that..." You know, we planned, you know, we planned to go out to Manhattan, you know, "No, I don't wanna go to Manhattan, I wanna go to Montauk." "Oh come on," I'm like, "We planned this stuff, you know, what's going on?" And then almost five minutes later we agreed to it, and everybody, you know, on their way, you know.

Anna Di Lellio: Who won the argument, you or them?

Ilir Bytyqi: Well, you know, we were very, very, very caring for one another's feelings, everybody, one another, you know what I mean? We were, "Okay, let's, we'll do this..." You know what I mean. We tried to get everybody, you know, everybody happy, make everybody happy. "Okay we're doing this this weekend, but we gotta do that next weekend." "Okay, we'll do it." You know what I mean, and everybody agreed to it. "Okay, good, go." We never stayed mad at one another, there was no reason, you know what I mean. We shared the house together, with my dad. You know they were perfect kids, they were perfect brothers, you know what I mean.

My parents were proud of us, I'm proud, I was proud of them, you know what I mean. 'Cause I spent most of the time with them, I was like a parent too, you know. But I'm like, "Okay..." You know.

Anna Di Lellio: So, who did the cooking when your mom was away, because you were all men there, right?

Ilir Bytyqi: Yes, we were here with my dad at the time, because my mom was in Kosovo. I did the cooking, my brother did the cooking, the pizza man, yeah, never... Even two, the other two of my brothers they know how to cook too, because a cook family... A family cooking, you know what I mean, they knew how to cook too. But you know, it was... I mean we cooked on weekdays, because sometimes that's why probably take our days off. Ylli, Agron and Mehmet would be off on Sundays, you know. Me and Ylli probably will be Tuesday, Wednesday, Monday, you know what I mean? We made sure we had, everybody has everything, you know what I mean. It's a typical family, you know what I mean. You know, everyday life.

Anna Di Lellio: Speaking about family, are you still in touch with the Roma family?

Ilir Bytyqi: Uh, no we have lost contact, I believe the person passed away from cancer. He passed away from cancer, the husband I believe, Mixhu... Maxhuni, Mexhid or Maxhun, I don't remember. I'm bad with names, believe it or not (smiles).

Anna Di Lellio: That's the American side (laughs)...

Ilir Bytyqi: We're American... No, it's not American, it's just too much, have too much, involved in life, you know what I mean, too much going on. It's just if I see the person, you know, facially, I recognize them, but names, I'm just like, "Stop talking because I don't know who he is." Or she, or... But if I see them in person, I have a good memory, like that, but names, I'd be just like, "Oh God..." You know.

Anna Di Lellio: I know that it is something now that is really upsetting you and your family, and all the people who fight for justice, for your brothers. Can you tell us a little bit more... what's going on?

Ilir Bytyqi: As I said the case is... It's been a hard, a hard 20 years, it will be 20 years, in July will be the twentieth anniversary of my brothers... And it hasn't been easy, it hasn't been easy, it has been very painful. Because it gets repeated over and over and over and over and over again, it's like, it's like pouring salt in an open wound, you know what I mean. But that doesn't hurt us, that just gives us

more, it gives us strength to keep going, keep moving forward. And hopefully justice will prevail, justice will prevail.

Anna Di Lellio: What do you do every anniversary, do you commemorate?

Ilir Bytyqi: We commemorate, we go to the cemetery, you know, every year we go sit down with family, dinner, you know what I mean, and remember them, talk about them, you know what I mean. Which is... it doesn't bring you any closure but does help a little, you know what I mean. But as I said, it does hurt more, it does hurt, you know what I mean, it does, it does, it does.

Anna Di Lellio: But you don't stop fighting, what about this petition that is going on?

Ilir Bytyqi: The petition we are filing, the petition is first, trying to stop a war criminal who is responsible for my brothers' deaths. The responsible... When I said my brothers' death, he was the one who also, when I said about my brothers' death, he is the one who ordered for my brothers to be taken from the prison. Early in the conversation we spoke about the Roman [sic] neighbor waiting at the prison when he was told they already left, they already took them to the border, you know what I mean? He was the one, Goran... I mean, Vlastimir Djordjević⁶ was the one who ordered my brothers to be taken from the prison to other side of Serbia in Petrovaselo.

And we are petitioning that he shouldn't be released due to because of his involvement in my brothers' murder, and also for much more mass graves that haven't been uncovered. Just recently a mass grave in Rudnica was discovered and he is responsible for it. But he hasn't been charged for it, so he has to face the consequences, he has been charged only with the mass graves that had been discovered, he hasn't been charged with the rest of these mass graves that still exist today in Serbia, which almost 1500 people are missing. Today, today their loved ones in Kosovo don't know their whereabouts, you know what I mean? they can't get closure. They are only constantly living in pain. You know, understandable if they had their remains, and they know where their buried and they could go, go, go and mourn, to them. But they don't have even that.

This is a crime within a crime that Serbia has committed, and it's not allowing the people of Kosovo, my family to mourn. It's continuing with conflicting [sic] pain.

Anna Di Lellio: Yeah...

Ilir Bytyqi: And this criminal should be held accountable for his crimes, he's the one, a hundred percent, no doubt in my mind, he is the one who committed, who ordered all these mass graves to be spread out to Serbia. There's 1500 people missing still, this is 1500 families, they don't know where, they don't have no closure, they don't have a place to mourn. They go and mourn to an empty grave.

⁶ Vlastimir Djordjević (1948) was Assistant to the Minister of Internal Affairs of Serbia during the war. Arrested and transferred to The Hague in 2007, he was found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity in 2011. He has been eligible for early release in 2019.

But I guess it doesn't bother Serbia, because Serbia, I guess, is still enjoying the pleasure of the pain that's being conflicted [sic] on Albanian people.

Anna Di Lellio: What gives you, and your family, your mother, your father, more comfort?

Ilir Bytyqi: Justice. Justice. Justice. And one day we'll see that justice will prevail. And no doubt in my mind that it will, it will. If president Vučić wants his legacy to be well-known as a great president, he has to finish this up. He has to finish what he started. He has to. Just recently I was watching him in the news media, he knows, he's crying about... everybody was going on... "But the surrounding neighbors are not allowing Serbia to move forward." But it's not that, Serbia itself is not allowing itself. Him, himself with this political, criminals, organized crime...

He has gathered organized crime leaders, he has gathered war criminals into his party, and what do you think? You think, with that kind of people in your party, they wanna move forward to the EU? No, that's just an excuse that you blame your surrounding neighbors. It's their fault that Serbia cannot, not move into the future. No, it's your own fault, you're the one. Who's holding Serbia back? That's not your surrounding neighbors. Because believe it or not surrounding neighbors and the US is all up for it. Germany is all up for it, Austria is all up for, everybody is all up for Serbia going to EU. But he's the one holding his own country back and blaming the surrounding neighbors that, that they're the problem. It's not the problem, they're not the problem. You are the problem. Vučić actually is the problem.

Anna Di Lellio: I, I asked you the questions, do you wanna add something? Do you feel like...

Ilir Bytyqi: No, per, per content. What do you think? How was it?

Anna Di Lellio: I think it was good.

Ilir Bytyqi: Yes. If you think...

Anna Di Lellio: Thank you so much!

Ilir Bytyqi: Well, I'm glad to be here. Thank you very much, Anna.