

Oral History Kosovo

INTERVIEW WITH BLERIM LUZHA

Pristina | Date: February 20, 2018

Duration: minutes

Present:

1. Blerim Luzha (Speaker)
2. Erëmirë 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

[The interviewer asks the speaker to talk about his early childhood memories. The question was cut from the video—interview.]

Blerim Luzha: I was born in Tirana, on October 25, 1937. I finished elementary school in a few cities because we came back from Tirana in '42, I finished [elementary school] in Mitrovica, in Prizren and in Gjakova. Because that's how my father was placed for work. I was born in Tirana because my father worked for 22 years during King Zog's time. He was a mayor, prefect and a teacher, he had a few different occupations. Then, I finished *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit*¹ in 1958.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were you a big family?

Blerim Luzha: What?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Let's not go this fast. Were you a big family?

Blerim Luzha: Oh family, too... yes. I come from a family, it was a big family, so my father had three children. I have... actually five children, two boys and three girls. I am the second child, Shpresa was the first, then Fëllanza. Mërgime [whose name means exile], was born in exile because my father was sent to a work camp and he was a political prisoner, yes, and sent to work camp. He was, I mean he spent eight years in prison and in the work camp. So he was a political prisoner because he was accused of working for Albania, because he insisted on the unification of Kosovo with Albania and things like that, but he was never tried.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was he sent to work a camp in Yugoslavia or Albania?

Blerim Luzha: What?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was he sent to a work camp in Yugoslavia or Albania?

¹ *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit në Pejë*, Art High School in Peja, was built in 1926 and opened in 1949. It was here that the first generations of visual artists in Kosovo received their education in figurative and applicative arts. The education they received enabled the artists to continue on to higher education in the arts. The historical building of the Art High School in Peja was destroyed in August, 2017.

Blerim Luzha: No, no, he was sent here, because we came here in '42. Then, I mean I was alone here at school. I finished school at boarding schools, in dormitories like a person without... because my mother died in '44 and I was practically an orphan. Then my father got remarried, and I have two sisters and a brother from my father, and so on. In 1958, 1958 I finished *Shkolla Mesme e Artit*. *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* lasts five years.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In Peja, or?

Blerim Luzha: In Peja, *Shkolla e Artit* was in Peja back then, and in the same year I graduated [from *Shkolla e Artit*] I enrolled at the Academy of Applied Arts in Belgrade. I only applied there formally because I thought I would not get accepted. Out of 320 candidates that applied, that went through the entrance exam, only about 40, 42 students were accepted.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Could you tell us in more detail about *Shkolla e Artit* in Peja? I mean *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* in Peja? How was it at the time? What did they teach you?

Blerim Luzha: Ah, the program?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What kind of professional preparation was it?

Blerim Luzha: *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* back then was called *Shkolla për Zbatimin e Arteve* [School of Applied Arts]. I was in the painting department, the school had two other departments, architecture and the wood processing department, as a form of sculpture, applied sculpture. The program of that school was, the whole school was in Serbo—Croatian, whereas we had Albanian language once a week, once a week, so one hour a week, no more. And we didn't have other professors in our language and so we didn't have other courses in Albanian, only this. In the year... I'm not sure in the second year or the third year, two Albanian professors came, Shemsedin Kasapolli² and Xhevat Gacaferri.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did these two teach?

Blerim Luzha: Shemsedin Kasapolli taught us aesthetics. He was a very good teacher, a very, very prepared professor, then later he became a professor at the Academy. He is one of the first people who had a diploma from the Academy of Applied Arts in Belgrade. So we had a feeling that things were good now that someone can speak Albanian, because in the beginning [when everything was in Serbian] we didn't even speak Serbian well.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And what were the students, were they... ?

Blerim Luzha: What?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What background did the students have, were they Albanian or?

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Blerim Luzha: You mean the pupils? Because this is high school, we are talking about high school. The pupils, there were a few Albanians, in my class, there were ten of us, ten pupils. A female and three male Albanian pupils. From all of them, it was Masar Nixha and I, he then continued on to Physical Culture and Sports Studies in Belgrade and Rexhë Kelmendi about whom I don't know anything for a long time because he went to Italy. So 30 percent were Albanians and 70 percent were Serbs and Montenegrins, there were a lot of Montenegrins. *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* in ex-Yugoslavia was a renowned school, especially for painting, we had very good professors, very hardworking.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you know the names?

Blerim Luzha: How?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you know the names?

Blerim Luzha: Of course, Svetozar Kamenović³ was our teacher, he was a painter from Pirot who was a very good teacher and he wasn't prejudiced, so he treated us like the others. Vlada Radović⁴ was from Peja, he taught us painting, Rufin Lazović. These were professors of professional subjects, we were taught Albanian by Ahmet Meha, Professor Ahmet Meha, who later changed his last name to Kelmendi, probably from Kelmendi *fis*.⁵ And he died actually a couple of years ago, he was a professor here at the *Shkolla e Lartë Pedagogjike*.⁶ The first director was Rista Jovović, a Montenegrin. He was a good man, but then they were not as nationalistically charged as they became later. What else should I say about *Shkolla e Artit*, I don't know.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What kind of education... I mean you were shaped more as a painter, right, at *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* in Peja?

Blerim Luzha: So there we had painting as a subject, drawing, action drawing that today we call it the nude, and then the other subjects. Theoretical subjects, art history, French language, then we had color technology, we even had chemistry.

³ Svetozar Kamenović (1921–1979) was born in Pirot, Serbia. He was a Kosovo Serb painter who finished his training at the Belgrade Academy of Fine Arts in 1953. After graduating, he began teaching at the Arts School in Peja, where he remained until his death in 1979. His paintings were widely exhibited in Kosovo, in particular in the 1970s.

⁴ Vladimir Vlada Radović (1901-1986) was born in Peja, Kosovo. He graduated from the School of Arts in Belgrade, Serbia. He was one of the first educated painters in Kosovo and an organizer of cultural life in Peja, as well as a teacher at the Art High School in Peja.

⁵ *Fis* is the Albanian exogamous kinship group that like the Latin *gens* includes individuals who share an ancestor. *Fis* can be defined as a patrilineal descent group and an exogamous unit whose members used to own some common property. Membership in a *fis* is based on a common mythical male ancestor.

⁶ *Shkolla e Lartë Pedagogjike*, The High Pedagogical School, was founded in Pristina in 1958 as the first institution of higher education in Kosovo. In 1974, the academic staff of the Figurative Arts department of the High Pedagogical School founded the Academy of Fine Arts within the newly established University of Pristina.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And regarding the history of art that you were taught at that time, was it Yugoslav or world history?

Blerim Luzha: No, so art history since the Neolithic Period, and Stone Age until modern art, so general art history.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was this education sufficient to prepare you for admission to Belgrade? The education in *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* of Peja, did it prepare you enough so you could then apply to the University in Belgrade?

Blerim Luzha: The matter of university was very problematic, I will tell you, I was anyway the son of a dissident so to say, but even after I graduated, of course with excellent grades, I went and applied to Belgrade. I told you how many candidates there were, I didn't even dream of getting in. I was assigned to teach figurative art at Mitrovica High School, but luckily I was accepted, it was luck, also my ability, but mostly luck, from 300 and more candidates. Even though *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* was renowned for painting in Yugoslavia. So we had good professors.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was the enrollment exam, what sort of requirements did they have there?

Blerim Luzha: The enrollment exam in Belgrade? The enrollment exam lasted five days. The enrollment exam lasted five days, we drew a portrait two days, nude one day. Then another day with colors, still lifes. Like this, so it was like general knowledge. And to tell you the truth I chose the Department of Textiles after I got in because of the scholarship. Because otherwise I would not have the chance to get a scholarship, and the textile factory in Gjakova promised me that if I chose textiles [to study] they would provide me with a scholarship.

But then, even though I knew them and they knew my father they didn't dare accept me, I mean being the son of the enemy, of the [political] prisoner and what do I know... Then, then a politician who was the director of *Rilindja*,⁷ whose name was Asllan Fazlia, a very good man, a communist, but very honorable, and he provided a scholarship for me after eight months. But my father, my father got out of prison when I finished high school. He had said, "I will educate you even if I remain without pots and pans. I will sell the *çilim*⁸ if I have to," because we were a little rich, *çilim* cost a lot back then, "and I will not leave you without an education."

Erëmirë Krasniqi: *Çilim*...

Blerim Luzha: Speak louder, I can't hear, I'm deaf...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I didn't understand, is it *çilim* or *çirim*? What are those?

⁷ *Rilindja*, the first Albanian-language newspaper in Yugoslavia, initially printed in 1945 as a weekly newspaper.

⁸ Turkish: *çilim*, known as kilim, is a flat tapestry- a woven carpet or rug traditionally produced in countries within the former Ottoman Empire.

Blerim Luzha: Textiles, so I mean textiles, in the textile section.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes, yes I understood that part but what did your dad say he will sell?

Blerim Luzha: Aa... sell the *çilim* of the house, the *çilim* of the house and some furniture just to send me to school. But then Asllan Fazlia gave me the scholarship and there were no more problems. From the second year, towards the end of the second year, the third and the fourth year, and the fifth year, because the Academy lasted five years just like *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* lasted five years. I worked at the Belgrade Fair, I did advertising, I drew on the boards, I painted and stuff like this and I didn't have any financial crises anymore.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can we go back to how you decided about art, how did you realise? I'm more interested in that, how did you decide to do art?

Blerim Luzha: In the beginning when I went to *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit*? I had talent, talent. And a cousin of mine who is a popular philosopher, he is still alive even though he is 90 years old. He would look at my paintings and say, "You should go there." And I went there, I was accepted. I was accepted without problems since I had good drawings because even *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* had an enrollment exam.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So you had to prove yourself there, too. What did you draw at that time, nature? What were you interested in?

Blerim Luzha: Where?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When you started drawing, what did you draw?

Blerim Luzha: Ah, my first drawings, school drawings, but I also drew portraits and figures and landscapes, still lifes. What kids do, they draw everything. Though, it seems I had talent and that's why I was accepted.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you have anything that you would want to tell us about your student life?

Blerim Luzha: What?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was student life in Belgrade?

Blerim Luzha: Throughout student life we were three people in the textile department. A girl who was called Mirjana Marić was my colleague, she became the most popular artist in Yugoslavia, she is still alive but we lost touch. And Mileva Lukić, she was from Aleksinac, and she [Mirjana] was from

Belgrade. Her maternal uncle was the ex—Minister of Foreign Affairs, Koča Popović,⁹ so they were a good family.

I was with her all the time, we were like brother and sister, and we were three people in the group, so we were together all week. We had professional courses in the morning, and theoretical ones in the afternoon. So, student life, excuse me, student life in the first and second year wasn't that good for me because I lived only on my scholarship, but then I had no problems so I finished the Academy with excellent grades.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Which years are we talking about, when did the Academy happen?

Blerim Luzha: I finished the Academy in '63, 1963. And I finished it with excellent grades. I was the only one with excellent grades in that generation, I won a scholarship from UNESCO at that time. But they asked me, "What kind of specialized studies do you want to do abroad?" As a young man I wanted to travel, we didn't get to go out of Yugoslavia at that time, you couldn't leave Yugoslavia without first serving in the army. My dream was to see the world and I chose Japan, Japan because I thought I would go through the Atlantic and come back through the Pacific.

But then I got upset, I got very disappointed because they didn't give me the passport after I graduated, people from the factory didn't give it to me. So, the factory, those from the textile factory. So they didn't dare give it to me. It wasn't that they didn't want to give it to me, but they couldn't. Then I came back from the Academy and I worked in the industry of, in the textile industry, it was called Emin Duraku¹⁰ in Gjakova.

But like every young man I wanted to go abroad and that's what I thought about, and I read the newspapers every day. I read a newspaper from Belgrade *Politika*, a daily newspaper. I saw an announcement, because in Europe there were 17 textile fairs organized per month, in some European cities. And I thought I would try to get a passport from the factory and go there. And then I went to the director of the factory and I said to him, "So and so there are 17 textile fairs organized in Europe and that is in the interest of the factory and mine to get the experience, and see what is being printed in Europe."

You know what, what kind of manufacturing of textiles because Yugoslavia was behind on textiles at that time. He said, "There's no way because we are in trouble, we have no financial means," he started complaining, "We are burning out like a pan in heat for money," and stuff like this so, no, no way. I realised that it wasn't happening, but I said to him, "Look," because back then it wasn't "Sir," but I said, "Comrade Director, I want to go, I'll cover my own expenses." "Just to go, just to go, just to go." He repeated it three times when I told him that I'd go with my own expenses, because he was relieved.

⁹ Koča Popović (1908–1992) was born in Belgrade, Serbia. He studied law and philosophy in Paris. Popović served as the Chief of the General Staff of the Yugoslav People's Army. He was the foreign minister of Yugoslavia, and spent the final years of his political career as the Vice President of Yugoslavia.

¹⁰ Emin Duraku (1918-1942) was a Yugoslavian partisan active during the Second World War, and a national hero. Duraku was born in Gjakova in 1918. He was an early Albanian member of the Yugoslav communist movement.

“Yes,” I said. [He asks] “What do you want from us?” I said, “I want you to provide me with a passport, I can’t go without a passport.” “We’ll try our best.”

I waited, I waited, I waited, the fairs ended. And to tell you the truth I was upset, I was deeply upset because I had, again I thought, I was of the opinion that they would provide me with a passport to go to Japan, even though they refused me once. And so I went to the director and I said, “How, how can you not provide me with a passport to visit these fairs? What can I expect from this factory? I can’t even hope to go to Japan. I have a scholarship, but I don’t have a passport.” Then he consulted with the staff that was in Pristina and he gave me the passport.

And this is also interesting about the passport, because while I was working at the textile factory, I also worked at *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* on Fridays and Saturdays. So I only worked at the textile factory four, five days, I worked at *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* in Peja. And one day while I was coming back, I went straight home. At the time I lived with my sister, I wasn’t married. She told me, “The people from the Secretariat of the Interior were here and they asked for you, because your passport is ready.” And I was so happy. You are a miss, right? [addresses the interviewer] Miss, Era when (laughs) I said, “How do I go now that the fairs have ended?” (laughs)

I went, I went to my director the next day, the director was not there, there was a deputy, there was a, anyway it is not important, his last name was Rugova. But not like our great Rugova, but he worked at the Secretariat of the Interior. She said to me, “The director waited two hours for you yesterday, he isn’t here today, but I’ll try.” She told me I should be careful, because we have given you the passport, there are migrants and you have some school friends that migrated there and you have to tell us what you talk to them about, you should do this and...

She started to prepare me, I said, “Look I have my own profession, I can’t say much for anyone else.” And I said, “We are young, we are... we go to discos, to balls. I can’t talk about politics and I don’t have the talent because I chose another profession.” And she saw that there’s nothing there and she gave me the passport, “Here, just be careful!” Now I had the passport, but there were no more fairs (laughs). Paris has many stores, from beginning to end it has 80 kilometers, I saw a lot of textiles, it wasn’t that necessary [to go to the fair]. And I took off, I forgot to tell you that as a student in the ‘60s, 1960, as a student at the Academy, our group went to Italy on an excursion and so...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you go there?

Blerim Luzha: What?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you go then?

Blerim Luzha: Then as a group, with one passport. And the moment we got to Venice, I had just put the clothes on the bed, the phone rings. He [the receptionist] says, “Someone is waiting for you downstairs.” I said, “Who is it?” I didn’t know anyone in Venice. I go there, there is a man around 45, 50 years old. He says, “Are you Blerim?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “I heard that you are a patriot, I’ve heard of

you, you are a patriot, you are like this, like this and that... we should see what to do about Kosovo.” He was really, he was, excuse me... he was a State Security¹¹ collaborator, he lived in Italy. He introduced himself as Emilio, he spoke Albanian, very good Elbasan Albanian. “How come you’re not interested in politics? Your father is a patriot and this, and that...”

My father had told me to not talk to any Albanians. He realised there’s nothing here, I said, “Look, you know what I’m interested in, a young girl if there are any, to go to a coffee shop, to get a drink since I’m in Venice for two nights. Go to a ball, I am interested in that.” He realised there’s nothing there, there’s nothing for me. He said, “Look, you’re a good guy, and you’re devoted to your profession.” He said, “There are two popular Albanian painters in Italy.” I said, “Now we’re talking,” I said, “I want to have their addresses. Who are they?” “Ibrahim Kodra¹² and Lin Delija.”¹³

And we parted ways, we had coffee and juice, we parted ways, it was over. When I got back to Belgrade from the excursion a letter with Ibrahim Kodra’s address was waiting for me, but he said he could not provide Lin Delia’s address. And I kept correspondence with Ibrahim Kodra since 1960, even...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did you write to each other? What did you write to each other?

Blerim Luzha: I have all the letters, I kept them. You do follow figurative arts? Listen because this might interest you too [addresses the interviewer]. And I wrote to him, “I heard you are very popular, I’m a student studying art. I’m from Pristina.” I told him everything. And he answered, he answered after two weeks or so. He answered in a way that I thought he didn’t even finish elementary school, he didn’t even speak proper Albanian, he could not write and the letters were like doodles, you know I thought so that’s how artists write. And now I had a dilemma of if I should write back or not, he was not worthy (laughs). The mind of a young man! I said I’ll answer out of courtesy. When I answered, within five, six days he sent me a package with exhibition catalogues. Catalogues that showed that he had exhibited with Picasso, with Matisse, then I realized who he was.

So, we had, we corresponded regularly until, until... for about 30 years. But, then Kodra got old, he got old, senile. He came here, because they asked, I had asked Kodra, let me tell you this detail since it is about Kodra, because Kodra is great. I asked him, among other conversations, I asked, “Are you married?” “No.” “Do you want to get married?” He said, “Why are you asking?” I said, “I have a father who likes to set up people” and I said, “two men came from Australia, he found wives for them in Pristina.” “Oh,” he said, “I’m very, very interested.” “Yes,” I said, “how do you want her?” He said, “I want her to be 18 years old, to speak three, four languages, one that can type on a typewriter, presentable, be like this...” [My father] said to him, “Mister Kodra, you clearly don’t want to get married. Where can you find an 18—year—old Albanian that can speak three, four languages?” He got

¹¹ State Security Administration in Yugoslavia, known as *Uprava državne bezbednosti [UDB]*.

¹² Ibrahim Likmetaj Kodra (1918 - 2006) was born in Ishëm, Albania. He was an Albanian modernist painter. He lived and worked in Milan, Italy.

¹³ Lin Delija (1926 - 1994) was born in Shkodër, Albania. He was an Albanian-Italian painter.

agitated, his facial expression changed, he was being a little absurd. Anyways this is a digression. When I came back from Paris, Kodra after seven years came here for an exhibition in '67.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was Paris for you since it was your first trip?

Blerim Luzha: Me? No, no we will stick with Kodra for a bit more. When he saw me from afar he waved his hand {explains with hands}, he said, "Eh, Blerim you were right, I still did not marry." (laughs) I don't know if I can say this or not, but since it is about a great person, why not?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Why not.

Blerim Luzha: And, how was Paris for me?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I mean what did you do, since it was your first trip out of Yugoslavia?

Blerim Luzha: Now, I'll tell you, because it was very hard in the beginning because I didn't speak French, because I learned English for the Japan scholarship. I could communicate and I had passed the exam at the Institute of Languages and Phonetics in Belgrade. When I went there, French people did not speak foreign languages, rare were those who spoke English. And like this, mostly with hands and stuff.

Eh, in the beginning I went as a guest of my father's friend, I stayed there for a month and a half as a guest. And then with their help, they found me a job, the job was in a meat canning factory. I washed some cauldrons for five months until I started speaking a bit of French. And then, I couldn't find a job in my profession because I didn't know where to look, there were no [textile] factories and stuff.

Then I met an Albanian woman from Përmet who was, who was like a minority, her father was Greek, her mother Albanian. She worked, she was old, she was about 60 years old, she worked in a few houses, she would clean for a week, a day, a, a day in one house... and I told her my situation, she worked in a house in which the owner worked in Orly Airport. And he invited me, there was an open position to go there to apply, because you know I told him which languages I speak, Albanian, Serbian, Turkish, these were languages that nobody spoke there.

And I acce... I almost passed the exam, went to the interview, but when they asked me, "Do you have a driving license?" I said, "No." And they turned me down. But, then she continued to look for a job to accommodate me and she found, I mean she found fashion and textile design houses. They are 21, there are 21 in Paris. And I applied to all of them, one after the other, one after the other, I was turned down everywhere. Two of them that were better known, I thought I would never get it. I tried there, I went, and they accepted me. That fashion house was called Dessens Opera, there at... have you been to Paris?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes, yes!

Blerim Luzha: Eh, at the Opera Square, because of the Opera it was called *Dessens Opera*. And I got in as an intern for a week. And I was accepted, after a week I was accepted, because on my third day, two of my works were bought by an Argentine. However, that was a secret, they didn't tell you. While we worked for that company, for the studio and they... we were 21, so 21 designers. And they [our designs] were owned by the company Dessens Opera, so we were anonymous.

There was a beautiful girl there, she was there as an office administrator and she knew, she knew English. And one day she was waiting for me at the door, after three—four days, she said, “Look, I want to congratulate you because two of your works were sold. But if anyone find outs, I will get fired.” I said, “I’m an Albanian, I won’t tell.” And I got accepted, when I got accepted after a week then I had a contract for three months. After three months they gave me a longer contract, I worked there, I had a good time.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So you did designs for them?

Blerim Luzha: Textile design. I worked there and it was a very good mix of Parisians. There were no... there was one from Brazil, a girl whose name was Josefina, we worked, only the two of us were foreigners and we were well accepted. The French are quite intolerant socially, but when they accept you into their circle of friends, they don't differentiate from their own... from the French. So, every birthday, every holiday they invited me and I had a good time. Are you interested in any of my experiences, any personal experience and... ?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes, yes if you have any interesting stories?

Blerim Luzha: It is a very interesting story, I mean I had a good time. I had four friends from Kosovo there, Albanians, and as a young man I was nostalgic to speak Albanian, so we met every Saturday, Sunday. And one day with a friend, we talked about, going, going to a street called *Saint Germain des Prés* and going to a ballroom there. He did not come, he did not come to the meeting and to tell you the truth I was a little mad because he was always punctual, very rarely him or me would be a few minutes late. I waited, I waited, I waited, he did not come.

I saw people going up the stairs [at a place] with music, I thought I should go in, just like that. I got in there, there were Japanese people, Japanese music and they got out and waited for me, they grabbed me by the hand, they sat me somewhere. I didn't know what was happening, food, and sandwiches, cakes, drinks, Japanese girls came, they wore kimonos. I danced, unaware, when it was 12 o'clock the bride came, it was a private wedding (laughs).

There were two parties, the groom's family, and the bride's family. Eh, his family thought I was a guest of her family, her family thought I was a guest of his (laughs). I had a, a great night, many pictures were taken, I did many things, but that's just that. I don't have any souvenirs because I didn't know anybody and I never saw any of them again. This was the best night in Paris (laughs).

Part Two

Blerim Luzha: Because at that time in Paris there were only 5300 Albanians, only in Paris there were 5300, no more. Who knows how many there are now. And all of them worked in the factories and I mean physical labor. In car factories, in other factories and so on. Only I had an intellectual job, and there was Ramazan Shpati, he was a *beyler*¹⁴ from Pogradec, he was a bridge construction engineer. Well, he worked.

He was the director of a big construction company, he was an intellectual, he was a good man, he was also involved with politics, he was the secretary of *Balli Kombëtar*.¹⁵ He wanted to get me involved in politics, too, but my father had instructed me, “One, never engage in politics; two, never marry a Serb; three, never smoke and never drink alcohol.” I followed all instructions (laughs). And then I had a really nice time with him because he said, “If you are interested in politics I’ll give you the platform,” [he said it] in a polite way, “and you can look at other parties’ platforms.” I told him, “Mister Ramazan, I have decided to go back because I have my family there, my father is old and stuff...” “You know your business.” This is it, this is it regarding Paris.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How long did you stay?

Blerim Luzha: I stayed in Paris for about three years, three years.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Ever since you got your passport you used it to go to Paris and you stayed there for three years?

Blerim Luzha: I stayed there for three years and I had a good time. But here, I was declared a deserter, because back then it was, young men couldn’t go abroad without going into the army.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You didn’t go to the army?

Blerim Luzha: No, I didn’t. Having been the eldest, my father believed in me. He goes, he went to the Minister of how is it called, the Minister of Defense of Yugoslavia, Ivan Gošnjak at the time. He went to him and said, “My son had been declared a deserter, but he will be back. I promise that he will be back, because my son is mature, he only is ambitious and went there to do graduate studies.” And he issued a decree stating that I was free from the army service until I graduated. And I couldn’t, I couldn’t, to be honest I had to come back since my father had given his word.

I knew what was waiting for me here. From there I came directly to the army. There was Svitan Onesi in the army, because I started the army in Rijeka, I did a little, two and a half months in the army. And he would say, this Onesi he became a Minister of Internal Affairs in Croatia in the government of

¹⁴ *Beyler*, rich families, from bey, Turkish title for chieftain, or leaders of small administrative units of the Ottoman Empire.

¹⁵ *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.

[Franjo] Tuđman. Because we were five, six people of my age, 30, 31 years old, the others were all 18 years old, so very young. And he would say, “Hey Blerim, go to the neuropsychiatry and tell them you came back from Paris to serve in the army, and he will declare that you aren’t... you aren’t in the right mind” (laughs).

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You did your graduate studies while you were working there in the fashion company, you went to school as well?

Blerim Luzha: Yes, yes, I forgot to mention that I did my graduate studies at *École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs*, it is called *École* because it was established by Louis IV, so it has many years of tradition. So the name was never changed. After you are done, after you finish university, you go there for specialized studies, in the department of textiles. And I successfully finished that. Eh, I forgot to tell you that.

I was done with army service, and then to tell you the truth I went to work in the textile factory there in Emin Duraku, even though they, they all the time said that, “We sent Blerim there.” No, Blerim went there but, “We sent him there and he betrayed us and stayed in Paris.” And for that reason I went back there to work. I had a year—long work contract and I stayed in Gjakova for two years. So, I was disappointed, I would do my design projects Era [addresses the interviewer], and I would hardly recognize my designs, they couldn’t produce it, the technology wasn’t advanced.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you work, or how only on the desk you had to...

Blerim Luzha: In the factory I did some things, they were printed, but most of them weren’t mine, my work, because the technology was primitive. But luckily I got married there to a, to a girl, and I stayed one more year then I came back here to work. At first I worked at the gymnasium¹⁶ even though there I had a better salary than the general director. I had set some conditions because I’d say, “This, this, this...” they didn’t all say, “No.” But, “Yes, yes, yes.”

My salary was 200 dinar, the general director’s salary was 140 dinar. I expected them to say no. So yeah, it was good. But, I wasn’t, I wasn’t happy with my job to tell you the truth and I got very worried when I went to get my salary. My salary was 200, the other workers’ salary was 40, 50, I would go to pick it up when no one was there, I couldn’t, it was really hard for me.

Then, I came here to the gymnasium I worked, I worked for about four months. Then I worked at the Secretariat of Education and Culture of Kosovo, there I supervised artistic creativity. From there *Bashkësia Krahinore e Kulturës* [Provincial Cultural Union] was established, that today is the ministry, and there also I worked as a collaborator for the arts.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Provincial Union was this...

¹⁶ A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

Blerim Luzha: BVI, ¹⁷BVI...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was Pajazit Nushi¹⁸ the president?

Blerim Luzha: No, no, no, Shefki Stublla was in the beginning then Sabit Jakupi. Nushi was Vice President of the Executive Council of Kosovo. And now, me with all of those troubles, all those struggles because elementary school was eight years, high school five years, university five years and specialization two years, twenty years. And I worked in the administration because there wasn't a gallery, there wasn't. But then since I was there from my profession I insisted for a gallery to open, I would say, "In the villages of Vojvodina there are galleries." There is this place called Ecka, it had six galleries, there wasn't one in Kosovo.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Where would you do the exhibitions?

Blerim Luzha: We would exhibit, there was a Cultural—Propagandistic Center, they had a big hall and we went there to do exhibitions but no, no...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Where was that?

Blerim Luzha: It was in front of the garrison I don't know how to tell you now. UNMIK¹⁹ is now there, where Zahir Pajaziti Square is now, down there in the right, I don't know how to tell you now.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes, I know, where Kraš used to be?

Blerim Luzha: No, a little further, the last building. Yes there, we exhibited there. Then we also exhibited in the foyer of the Provincial Theatre, Pristina didn't have a gallery. Me being there, constantly pressuring the Department of Culture that it is a shame to not have a gallery. And then I made two elaborations they were called then, now they're called projects. Two projects for the establishment of the Gallery and finally in 1979 it opened, Pristina got a gallery, and then I worked in the Gallery.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did you work in the Gallery, what was your role?

Blerim Luzha: So in the Gallery I was a curator for applied arts and the Gallery's collection.

¹⁷ Bureau of Self-Governing Interests, now the Public Housing Enterprise in Pristina.

¹⁸ Pajazit Nushi (1933-2015) was born in Gjakova, Kosovo. He held many political and government positions, all in the education field, at the municipal, district, Kosovo and ex-Yugoslav Federation levels. During the Milošević regime he taught psychology in the parallel education system. He was the director of the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms for twelve years. At the time of his death, he was Vice-President of the Academy of Arts and Sciences of Kosovo.

¹⁹ The United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo. UNMIK was established by the Security Council Resolution 1244, which was passed on 10 June 1999. In that Resolution, the UN decided to deploy in Kosovo, under United Nations auspices, an international civil and security presence.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us the story of the Gallery’s collection, how was it created, how were the artworks collected?

Blerim Luzha: Yes, I can. Then a budget was allocated to buy artwork, the collection was under the patronage of the Cultural—Propagandistic Center, the one I told you about it would organize the exhibits. There was a commission of painters that bought artworks but they were a few, they were a few. But slowly when BVI was created, so we bought then, because I was there. Nahire Surroi was on the commission. I don’t know if you know Nahire Surroi, Agush Beqiri²⁰ was there, who else was there? There were some others who weren’t in same profession as us.

So we made the collection, which is here now. So a good collection was created. But with the foundation of the Gallery, the collection was enriched. When Professor Shyqri Nimani²¹ was the director, he had great connections, he secured from other republics as well. Here even, there is collection of summer games, winter games,²² winter, there are some posters I don’t remember how many, of the most popular painters and graphic designers in the world. There is some of Kodra’s artwork, too.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So the artworks that were initially collected through this Cultural—Propagandistic Center were given to the Gallery?

Blerim Luzha: So, then the Committee of the Provincial Cultural Union, then the Gallery inherited all the artwork. With the founding of the Gallery the artworks were given, with the founding of the Gallery the collection that was under the patronage of the Cultural—Propagandistic Center was given to the Gallery and then the Gallery had its own collection.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What happened with this Cultural—Propagandistic Center, did it work parallel to the Gallery?

Blerim Luzha: No, no, no, it organized concerts, it organized amateur theatre recitals, festivals, poetry meetings, there were a few events there. This was just the commission of buying artwork that provided some artworks from local and foreign artists.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was it at the time when you worked as a curator here at the Gallery, what kind of work did you do, did you choose a theme and then create all the exhibits or how, how did you do this job?

²⁰ Agush Beqiri (1932- 2006) was born in Peja, Kosovo. He was a Kosovo-Albanian interior designer and architect.

²¹ Shyqri Nimani (1941) was born in Shkodër, Albania. He is a Kosovo-based graphic designer and professor who graduated from the Academy of Applied Arts in Belgrade. Nimani is known as one of the first professional Albanian graphic designers, he is also one of the founders of the Graphic Design department at the Faculty of Arts, University of Pristina and one of the first directors of the National Gallery of Kosovo.

²²

Blerim Luzha: We were two, in fact, two kustos, curators as they call them now. Initially I found Engjëll Berisha²³ already working here. I was with Engjëll, then Engjëll retired and then a colleague of ours came whose name is Rexhep Goçi.²⁴ Rexhep Goçi, he graduated from The Royal Academy of Arts in Brussels. His field was figurative art, mine was applied art. I also had [under my responsibility] the collection of the Gallery, so I was responsible for Gallery's collection. We organized exhibitions, many exhibitions.

Our gallery had the most visitors of all the galleries in Yugoslavia. Do you know why? Because we would organize some exhibitions that came from Albania, people were nostalgic. At times there were exhibitions that had 70–80.000 visitors, long queues, they would wait in a queue {shows with his hand}. Because the Gallery was at the Palace of Culture in the beginning, the Palace of Sports near the Elida confectionery. And there were old people, young people, women came to see the exhibition, so it was an attraction.

When our colleagues from Belgrade, from Sarajevo or Ljubljana came and saw all of that, they would say, "Impossible!" But they did not come only for the paintings, they came because they were motivated to see something Albanian, and we had nostalgia and love for Albania as we do now, but it isn't like it used to be.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was the communication with Albania at the time good enough so artists would come to exhibit?

Blerim Luzha: No, it wasn't, it wasn't but it opened up. The communication was opened after a few years, in '78 for the first time was the exhibition of Kosovo Applied Arts at the National Gallery of Figurative Art in Albania.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can I ask you a question here? So at the time when the Gallery didn't exist, who organized the travels of Kosovo artists?

Blerim Luzha: Ah, before the Gallery was founded?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes.

Blerim Luzha: The center together with me. Upon the founding of the Gallery, then the Gallery took over.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you go, too? How was your time in Albania?

²³ Engjëll Berisha (1926-2010), also known as Befre, was an Albanian painter from Kosovo. Berisha was born in 1926 in Pejë, Kosovo. He graduated from the University of Belgrade in 1954. He was a member of the Academy of Figurative Arts of Kosovo.

²⁴ Rexhep Goçi (1947) was born in Junik, Kosovo. He studied figurative arts at the University of Pristina. Later, he continued his studies at the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles.

Blerim Luzha: I went to Albania for the first time in '78, in '78 the Kosovo Applied Arts exhibition was at the National Gallery. We were thirteen participants and eight of us went to the opening, they were very welcoming. Then after a year they invited me personally, I had a solo show in 1978.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: '79.

Blerim Luzha: I mean '79.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did you exhibit there?

Blerim Luzha: I exhibited textile designs. And that exhibition was very well—received. They wrote, it is in the catalogue, if you have my catalogue, some fragments, some people.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you remember how Albania was at that time, any interesting details from that time?

Blerim Luzha: I was in Albania even before '78, because I worked at the Province's Cultural Union, an ensemble from Kosovo went, the Emin Duraku folklore ensemble from Zhur. And I took care of all the formalities because I worked for the Province's Cultural Union. And I told the director, Hamdi, I don't know his last name, I don't remember, I said, "I'm so envious that you are going, I was born there. I saw Europe, but I still haven't seen Albania, my country." He said, "Why, you want to come?" I said, "What kind of a question is this?" When he came the next day he asked for my passport. I was so happy, the first time I went. But, when I got there I was very disappointed, it was in a very bad state, very bad. Then again it was our country, I could never speak badly.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did you see, what did you notice? What did you notice on that first visit? You were in Tirana, right?

Blerim Luzha: In the first visit, no, no. We were in a few cities, they made concerts, I went as their guest. Just me and a journalist from Prizren, Randobrava. They would look at us like, you know, we weren't from Zhur, they thought maybe, maybe the secret police sent us or something. That's what they suspected. Later when I talked to my friends, they said, "We thought that everything you said was propaganda." I would tell them that I was in Paris, then I forgot to tell you that when I was in Paris, I visited almost all of Europe.

Because there was an agency that anyone would pay 25 francs to go, to go anywhere. And I went there, just like today, because you've seen the offers there. Someone wanted to go to Norway, someone to Germany, someone there, they wanted company. And I went there for three, four days during holidays, I was everywhere. The only places I haven't been to are Finland and Portugal, I saw all of Europe. And they would ask me and I would tell them, later when Albania was democratic they said, "Blerim, we didn't believe you, now we believe you because we thought it was propaganda." So they didn't trust us.

When we had openings of solo shows, we bought artworks from almost every artist. They would open the exhibit and we would buy, we also would go to their studios and buy, yes. Though the collection was small not as big [we had no space for more works] as was needed, but we also didn't have, the storehouse was full, we didn't have space. Because the hall of Boro Ramiz was really nice, so in the Palace of Youth as they call it now, but the storehouse was small. And, so the collection, now from there we came here, freer and different.

The collection lately wasn't as it was in the beginning, the repression and Serbia's shenanigans there was no, a little, the figurative artwork wasn't bought as much. Now I don't know if the collection still exists, I forgot to ask Arta.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes, yes it is here, that's why I asked.

Blerim Luzha: The collection is here, is the artwork being bought?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Ah, no. I think not.

Blerim Luzha: Eh, that's really bad, really bad. Then look, it's a huge paradox, the ex—director, Luan Mulliqi, came to my office here one day and said, "Pick some works because the Provisional Government is asking for them." I said, "What kind of works?" He said, "To decorate." I said, "Look, they don't get out of the Gallery, they get out of the Gallery, when someone from relevant institutions asks to exhibit them and brings them back. And, there it is written that this is the Collection of the Gallery of Arts, Pristina."

But, he made me, I said, "Okay, you give a statement. I don't take out the artwork from the collection without an official order." He gave me order and I gave them to him. So, some really good artworks were distributed. If you paid attention, whenever the Prime Minister appears [on TV] there's a painting of Engjëll Berisha. That is from the collection. It doesn't happen anywhere in the world that paintings or sculptures, or an artwork is taken out from a museum or a gallery and be put in an office.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Until when did you work here?

Blerim Luzha: I worked here until March 1, 2003. Then I turned 65 and I had to retire.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were you here until '89, '90 or you were working at the Gallery the whole time?

Blerim Luzha: No, no, I was here the whole time, the whole time I was here. During the war, we, we had... We had, I'll tell you this note, too. So we also had the... because here, I don't know the years, I forget them. When it was, when Serbia started being violent here, they ordered us to make the catalogues in Serbian first and then in Albanian. Because constantly we made them in Albanian first.

And I left with my new colleague to go to Ibrahim Rugova,²⁵ at the *Lidhja Demokratike*,²⁶ its headquarters was at the [football] stadium, and on our way there we see Fehmi Agani,²⁷ “Where are you going?” He said, “Ibrahim isn’t here, is there anything I...” I said to him, “They gave the order that we should make the catalogues first in Serbian then in Albanian, we won’t accept without consulting you.”

So then no one, this was, this was four—five years before the war but I don’t remember the date. He said, “Blerim,” he said, “you are responsible for this, your duty is the Gallery. Stay there and protect the collection.” Because I told him, “We are prepared to quit our jobs, to revolt.” “No, no way! You should stay there and protect it.” And we stayed here until May 3, 1999. Until May 3, 1999. Then I had to go to my sister in Skopje.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you go to work during April?

Blerim Luzha: Yes, yes, yes we worked. We had a circulation permit from a, from the director. We could come and go. My colleague left sooner because they evicted them from their buildings at *Bregu i Diellit* [Sunny Hill]. I, because I live here in front {shows with his hand}, at this building, it’s the officers building, ex—officers. So my apartment was right over Rugova restaurant here. And I worked until May 3, when I went to Skopje, because my sister would call me every night, “Come, what are you doing there?” You know, because we know how things were.

And luckily we came back, we came back, not one single work was missing, not even one. To tell you the truth I was worried about my work as well because I have a collection of 120 works. I forgot to tell you that when I was for the first time, when I met Kodra, he gave me two of his works. And I’m constantly with them, even as student in Paris, I had his paintings {shows with his hands} at my hotel.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Since you were here at the Gallery, what happened here during the ‘90s? I mean what sort of programs did you do?

Blerim Luzha: Programs, programs were mostly, I don’t know what to tell you. It was mixed, but it dominated, the Serbian one dominated. So, the authors were Serbian, mostly the authors were Serbian. There were exhibitions from other republics as well until the war started, but they were few. There were, there were these collective exhibitions, salons, painting biennales where Albanians also participated, then Albanians started to, to boycott. And we tried to convince them, told them that, “This Gallery isn’t theirs, it is our Gallery. Why not exhibit?” Once, it was the year ‘99 I think, I don’t remember if it was ‘98 before the war, he forced me, the Serbian director said, “Do the opening of the

²⁵ Ibrahim Rugova (1944-2006) a writer and journalist, founder and leader of the Democratic League of Kosovo and President of Kosovo during the war and after until his death.

²⁶ *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* - Democratic League of Kosovo. First political party of Kosovo, founded in 1989, when the autonomy of Kosovo was revoked, by a group of journalists and intellectuals. The LDK quickly became a state-party, gathering all Albanians, and remained the only party until 1999.

²⁷ Fehmi Agani (1932-1999) was a philosopher, sociologist and politician, one of the founders of the Democratic League of Kosovo. He was assassinated by Serbian troops as he attempted to flee Pristina disguised as a woman to avoid detection.

exhibition!” I told my friend, “I can’t open it in Serbian. I’ll open it in Albanian first and we say our goodbye here.” I started in Albanian first and then I continued, “*Dame i Gospodo...*” [Ladies and Gentlemen...] I started in Serbian, because we could speak Serbian as well as Albanian, nothing happened I got applause. I thought they would give the notice to leave the next day, but it was fine.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was cultural life at the Gallery, since it was... it was more focused only on one part [of the population]?

Blerim Luzha: Well, look, so they mistreated us a little, but we had Fehmi Agani’s instruction [or else] we wouldn’t have stayed here. I could have gone to Paris, my friends invited me. But he would say, “It’s your duty to protect the institution.” And our office was right in front of here {shows the other side of building}, you can imagine now, we couldn’t say, but there was heating in all of [the offices], in our office there was no heating. And my friend would smoke, it would be all smokey in there, we couldn’t even open our windows. But we worked in those conditions, in those conditions and I don’t regret it, I don’t regret it because it could have been worse.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Then, nothing, I just wanted to ask you what were the exhibitions like, more art from Serbia, more Serb students? Was it ethnically divided as an institution?

Blerim Luzha: Here there were more exhibits of Serbs, they dominated. But there are annual reviews here, you know, you can take the notes from there. To tell you the truth now I’m 80 years old, I forget (laughs). I don’t remember some things.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was your life like after retiring, do you paint now after you’ve retired, now, I mean, ever since you retired in 2003?

Blerim Luzha: When I retired, look to tell you the truth I retired, no sense in saying this, but the Gallery didn’t behave quite nicely. Luan Mulliqi,²⁸ they didn’t behave quite nicely because... there’s no sense in talking about this. Because I could’ve worked more, because there are a lot of people who work after retiring. Also it was some kind of order to leave when you turn 65. Though, in the beginning, for a week I didn’t take it well, but then even if they had payed me triple I wouldn’t have gone back.

This is a digression, when King Leka came back and was a candidate for elections the journalists asked him, “What will Leka gain if he wins the elections?” He said, “He wins the crown, but if he loses he will gain tranquility.” So I gained tranquility and that’s very good. Then I did other things, I wrote, I wrote for *Koha Ditore* [Time Daily], for *Zëri* [The Voice]. I don’t know if you followed them, they were earlier. But, I mean for the last five, six years I wrote for a newspaper in America called *Dielli* [The Sun] that is a department within the *Vatra* [Homeland], an Albanian association, I wrote there about painters and things like this, so I didn’t have time.

²⁸ Luan Mulliqi (1953) born in Gjakova, Kosovo, and graduated from the Academy of Figurative Arts, the department of Sculpture in Pristina in 1977. He received a Master’s degree in Belgrade in 1979. He was the first post-war director of the Pristina Gallery of Arts, now the National Gallery of Arts.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you still paint?

Blerim Luzha: I paint very little, very rarely, and I have many painting in my drawers, under the sofas, like a person who lives in an apartment. I wanted to travel because I could have built two houses with what I earned for a year, but I travelled with my wife and kids and I don't regret it.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Would you want to add something that you think would complete the interview?

Blerim Luzha: I don't know what to add, but now maybe I am old, art now has reached the limits of absurdity. The English critic Johnson says, "Like the garbage trucks that go and collect the garbage." Because abroad you have to put everything in its place, the bottles, textile, food. "Why do they do the selection when, when they have modern art and they can put them all into the trucks."