

INTERVIEW WITH ISA REXHA

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Duration: 62 minutes

Të pranishëm:

1. Isa Rexha (Speaker)
2. Erëmirë Krasniqi (Interviewer)
3. Aurela Kadriu (Interviewer)
4. Besarta Breznica (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

Erëmirë Krasniqi: As I told you earlier, the interview is mostly biographical. We would like to start from what do you remember from your earliest memories? Your family? The circle you grew up in? Education? Everything you remember and however you remember yourself.

Isa Rexha: I came from a village, Barileva. First I'll tell you I'm born on 17.01.1959. Since I enrolled in the Faculty of Economics as a 20-year-old... through the Faculty, the cooperative of students, I was employed at Grand Hotel, as a worker at Grand. From 05.02.1980 I was a security worker until 14.03.2004, actually in '83 when I gained the status of a worker, not as a worker at Grand but at SLOGA.

SLOGA included Hotel Grand, Božur, Belgrade Restaurant, Villa Gërmia and a hotel in Fushë Kosova. It had 18 locations. At SLOGA I started working in accounting. In '83-'84 I was the accountant of fixed assets and small inventory. In '85 I received the title of chief liquidator at the SLOGA Company. I made the payments, supplier transfers, from then until '89 when Serbia applied measures inside of SLOGA. I lost my job and continued working as a liquidator, a liquidator until '97 when I quit.

No, they didn't fire me but I quit. I didn't want to work with them anymore so I got engaged with other workplaces. When I first came to Grand, it's interesting... today I say that a lot of hotels have stars, and Grand had five stars, but the conditions Grand had, there isn't any other hotel that has them today, not in the world, because there might be, but not in Europe.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What kind of conditions were they? Can you explain it a little?

Isa Rexha: Yes. First of all in the basement... Inside the Grand Hotel, there's a bowling alley, billiards, tennis, it has... Anyway, on the second floor, there is a washer and, on the same floor, that was a wardrobe and bath. There were two pretty big wardrobes. Even though you have to go through... You have to make a request to record those through the PKA because we aren't allowed to record them.

There were two huge wardrobes for women and for men. There were divisions for women in the kitchen, every cook before starting work... Even the cleaning crew couldn't get inside the Grand Hotel if they did not get in... Every sector had four cabins, shower cabins, you had to take a shower, and wear the uniform to come to work. Or the guest could not go inside Grand Hotel, I am talking about the '80s because I was a security guard myself, they could not come inside Grand Hotel until '89 if their

shoes weren't clean, clothes ironed, you couldn't go inside with jeans, or if you weren't shaved or something.

So, the conditions were great. Not even the cleaners... excluding the administration that didn't have a wardrobe and didn't have special cabins, shower cabins. The others, the cleaning crew, the cooks, the waiters, everybody had them. They had their own wardrobe. So, it was super nice. But, since '89...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Let's not rush. Let's go slow, build this part...

Isa Rexha: But, I've been there constantly since 05.02.1980, excluding '97- '99, August 10, '99.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: While you're telling us, don't rush to get to '89 because I'm interested to know the atmosphere here. What did you work on? What did you do? You told us shortly, but if you could tell us in more detail, the more details, the better for us. I would want to go back to the '80s when you started working and what... I don't know what we could ask him.

Aurela Kadriu: Maybe you can just tell us what the Student Cooperative was, start there. How did the Student Cooperative bring you in and then those three years that you worked as a security guard?

Isa Rexha: Yes.

Aurela Kadriu: What did you see during your work?

Isa Rexha: I wanted to, since it is more biographical, I talked shortly, I explained the work...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: We are not interested to talk shortly, we really want to stop and talk about the details because through details we can understand more...

Isa Rexha: The Student Cooperative still exists. It's in front of the Economics Faculty...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Really?

Isa Rexha: Yes, yes.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I didn't know.

Isa Rexha: It still exists.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: It's called the Cooperative?

Isa Rexha: I don't know what it's called. There's a small building at the Economics [Faculty], that building in front is what used to be the Student Cooperative. Xhaferi was the director at that time. But, I didn't mind who it was, I came here through the Student Cooperative.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Okay. Let's start, how did you come to Pristina? Let's start there, tell us...

Isa Rexha: How I came to Pristina...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How do you remember Pristina at that time?

Isa Rexha: Aaa, my family was here, my father was here, here started...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you start [addresses the camera]?

Besarta Breznica: Yes.

Isa Rexha: My father was here. He used to be a smith. He worked... he had his shop at Xhamia e Llapit. So, after time after time, at least once a week I would come to Pristina. So, I was familiar with Pristina even when I was in elementary school at Brileva, Ali Kelmendi School. I came to Pristina and finished Xhevdet Doda Gymnasium, it used to be where the Cathedral is today. Then I enrolled in the Faculty of Economics. There was only one course because now there are many.

The first year, to tell you the truth I was interested but not, but imposed by my circle. And I came to Grand Hotel through the Student Cooperative. I was paid by Grand Hotel, but they gave 20 percent to the Student Cooperative, that was the percentage that was given then. They took their percentage, 20 percent, they gave the rest to me as a monthly wage. I was there from the second month of '80 until the fourth month. From 13.04.1983, when on 12.04 I gained regular employee status and I went to SLOGA.

But, when I was a worker from Student Cooperative, I'm talking about the time I started at Grand, for me it was, not to say... I don't know, I don't have words to explain it. It was something very, very, very good. It was very serious, they worked well, they had a lot of guests, the discipline was on point. There were people who were engaged, but they were civilians from the police, apart from us. There were civilians who walked around here to keep the order at Grand. There were... it was the only hotel in Kosovo that international guests came to...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What kind of guests? From all over Yugoslavia...

Isa Rexha: From all over the world. I'm talking from all over the world, not Yugoslavia. There were guests from all over the world there. From all over the world and all kinds. It was an aspect you can freely call Kosovo's *Oda*¹, because people... just like Swiss Diamond is today.... Ambassadors, state presidents and so on. On the third and fourth floor, especially the fourth, they worked only for Tito.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Tito?

Isa Rexha: Yes, yes probably heard of him, I didn't know him. I had the opportunity to be present when Tito came. The fourth floor is still called Tito's residence. But... anyway, I'll go back to what I was talking about, but in Tito's residence, before the war, now, even during the war, the leadership that led the army, the police during the war didn't stay in the police station but they stayed here at Grand. And they have directions from here, from Tito's Residence. Now for the security, I don't know what to say, I didn't have even the smallest problems, the security was...

¹ Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was your routine like? What was your work routine?

Isa Rexha: It was... I started working from 17:00 to 04:00 in the morning so... because I was also a student, I wanted to learn, this was it. Then I started working from 21:00 to 04:00, since I had exams and lectures and so on. So, I worked. But, when I noticed here that every sector in Grand, the kitchen, the waiters, they all have their own uniform... at that time, their own showers.

I noticed that even the cleaner who picked up the trash during the day or something, they couldn't go to the hall in Grand without first taking a shower, wearing the work uniform and begin working with a clean uniform, not go in and out however they want, let's not even talk about the cooks and waiters. So, there was order, there were many people like this.

On the thirteenth story there's a restaurant, it was called Restaurant Panorama, where you can see almost... now Pristina has widened, but at that time you could see all of Pristina. Then on 13.04 I gained the status of regular worker...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I wanted to stop here, what kind of city was Pristina at that time? Was it safe when you worked security? In a way did you have some kind of awareness about safety in general?

Isa Rexha: It was somewhat safe, but no, because in '81, on April 11, March 11, '81 I was a student and I took part in the demonstrations of '81. On April 1, on April 2, on March 28, I took part in all the demonstrations as a student. But, here in Grand, inside Grand there was great safety. Since they didn't bother us, they didn't bother us. The protestors didn't come in but also the police surveillance inside the facility didn't increase during the demonstrations.

There were two people, Xhaferi, he was Albanian, and I don't remember the name of the other one, Sali, if I'm not mistaken. There were two people all the time, whether there were demonstrations or not, so they were present at Grand, but even during the demonstrations there weren't more people to come and check or soon. But the protestors didn't come inside Grand, the protesters at that time. They didn't come inside Grand to bother us or to break something or... they didn't break anything, they didn't bother us. Work was done here in a normal way, as if nothing was happening. But we saw what was happening, the guests noticed.

At that time there were no rooms for the foreign journalists who followed the demonstration of '81, there were no rooms. Even though, in '81 they told us... there was a curfew and it was after 8:00 in the evening until 5:00 in the morning... because the kitchen worked until 24:00, but there was no way to go out. They had to provide a place to sleep here, rooms where the employees slept. But, there were many journalists, I am talking about the whole world, there were just a few from Yugoslavia. But there were many journalists. So, I said earlier, there was an *oda* and they gathered here, they followed the demonstrations and all of them were here... it was always full, there was a lot of work, the salary...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was it like for you since you were also a student. You worked as security here but at the same time as a student you were in protests there. What was it like to live this double life at that time?

Isa Rexha: Well, look, some people at work were interested to know where you were, what did you do, how was it, did they get to you, but it was very interesting for us, very interesting...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Wasn't it a conflict of interest?

Isa Rexha: Working here?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Aha.

Isa Rexha: Ah, no, no, no, it didn't... no, no, no. Not at all. No, not with work. No one asked me something like, "Why were you there, were you there?" On the contrary they asked, "How was it today? Did you have any problems? Did they take anyone? Who did they take? Where were there more people? Where were the biggest problems?"

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Where were they, can you tell us?

Isa Rexha: Well first, when they began, they were at the Student Canteen, at the Student Canteen but they were mostly here behind the theatre, the theatre was... they were always the biggest there and at the Student Canteen. There were always the biggest, behind the theatre and at the Student Canteen.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When the police came, I mean even the military came to stop this nationalist explosion as they described it then, what did the students do? Do you remember?

Isa Rexha: Well, we always protested...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Because it was a big crisis, how fast Yugoslav forces intervened in Kosovo in that manner to stop a protest and they didn't write much about it. For example, *Rilindja* doesn't write about the protests at all. How was it communicated about what was happening in that protest?

Isa Rexha: Well at that time they called them all, well not today even Albanians who were leaders were called nationalists. In reality, I said we asked for our rights, we asked for some kind of republic that at that time was... we had autonomy but we asked for a republic, as all other republics. They called us nationalists just because we had... because we were Albanians. The police came... the military didn't come out into the streets, the police did. They came from all the republics, they even came from Slovenia and Croatia. Then later the police of Slovenia and Croatia stepped back because separation inside Yugoslavia began. So, then there were many sentenced...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were you as a student penalized in any way since you took part?

Isa Rexha: No, no, in any way. I had four cousins in the village Besi, at that time they took around one thousand automatic weapons from a truck if I'm not mistaken. So, they were in prisons around 14, 15 years.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Why did they take them?

Isa Rexha: Because they stopped a truck, it was filled with weapons so they took, the people took up arms at that time. I don't know the exact date, I don't know. But, they took notes, so they took them

during the night. Whoever took them were all sent to prison, around 500 people. There in Besi, those who were part of that, when they stopped the truck coming from Niš, from Serbia, they took the weapons.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You said you were here, you came to Pristina time after time. I'm going back, that you came to visit your father at least once a week. Do you remember when Hotel Grand was built? When did the construction begin?

Isa Rexha: I have a picture of Grand but I don't have it with me today, before it was finished.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Are you in the picture or just the building?

Isa Rexha: No, no, just the building. I said after '84, '83, well after '85 I took care of registration and everything. Also after privatization, I knew more about privatization than the owner. I have the purchase contract, so when it was sold by PAK [Privatization Agency of Kosovo], actually the purchase contract the owner had. There were a lot of differences, there were a lot of changes since the privatization, but especially since the violent measures in '89, Grand had great changes.

The wardrobes aren't functional, the showers aren't functional, they were destroyed. At the time when Grand started construction, as I said, it doesn't have a building permit today. Grand doesn't have a building permit. The project plan exists only with floors. You can find it in Kosovo's archive just by floors. This plan was designed by... the designer was Matej Rudić.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Bashkim Fehmiu?

Isa Rexha: There was also Bashkim, but Matej Rudić was the head, he worked on all of them, they were under his supervision, he is Albanian.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: He was a painter, right?

Isa Rexha: Yes, a painter, he was Albanian but lived in Croatia. This project was done from Dubrovnik, they couldn't find a place and Tito said to bring it here. They brought it behind here, this building was the command of the former Yugoslav Army for Kosovo. And at this part here where the theatre is, they thought of putting a memorial of Tito there. His hotel was here, his rooms were here. So, his room is as big as this hallway, not to say that one of his rooms is over 200 square meters. It doesn't have a building permit, you can't find...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What more do you remember from that period? Do you remember when the construction began?

Isa Rexha: No, because I was little... but I accidentally found a picture when Grand was under construction, before it was done. I will bring that picture.

Aurela Kadriu: When you came to Pristina to visit your father, when you saw that a hotel of that category was being built, how did people talk about it? How do you remember it? What did people say as Grand was being built?

Isa Rexha: Well, to tell you the truth, back then I was a kid and we were more interested in playing rather than talking. But, when I started high school, I lived here at Xhamia e Llapit, so I passed by here every day. I remember that my father said that it used to be a well here and that it was a cow market back then. So exactly where Grand is, there was a well, a pool that you couldn't swim in. They couldn't even play there, and it was a cow market back then.

But when Grand was built... Ramiz Sadiku built it, the construction is strong, the walls are thick, they're all concrete, there's nothing... if you're interested we can go out and see the exterior facade, but the interior one is horrible. The walls are more than half a meter wide. Now at that time that was the standard and it was really good. There was the project that exists to connect with the Sports Center, that was called Boro Ramiz before, that their halls be used by Grand Hotel's guests, and these two act as one.

So Grand Hotel and the Sport Center are like an organization, to be used there and the guests from there to come here and they... An overpass was foreseen, a one floor down, there the exit forms the hall towards where the Central Bank is now, where the SDK used to be, and overpass to be built there, covered, to go to the Sport Center now, it used to be Boro Ramiz. And their halls to be used by the guests of Grand Hotel, but also guests from there to come here. But they were never finished, those connections never happened.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Let's continue with Grand, because I would want, if you can, to go back to your father and store as a smith. How did it work at that time? Because I find it interesting that your father was in Pristina and he was in the old part of the city. Do you remember anything from the old part and for the craftsmen? There were probably others and was that part of the city organized?

Isa Rexha: Yes, yes. My father was interested in private work since he was young. He was a smith, they were called blacksmiths here. He built the first cars with wooden wheels back then. They made some, I don't know what they're called today, but we called them *qëkërrka* to water the ground, they were turned around by a horse, the buckets were connected with one another and the water came out in that *qëkërrka* and each had its own pool, when it came there, the water filled and went up and and it emptied. He was very hardworking, we were in good conditions, I have four brothers, so never...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you help him in his job?

Isa Rexha: Ah no, no, no. He was very interested in school and he loved school a lot. At the time when the shooting was happening, he said... because my father had Cyrillic literacy. My oldest brother knew Cyrillic, he is now 80 years old... so at that time the Law University didn't exist here, he took him to Niš to study law. So he loved school. All my brothers are... our father said to us, "You have everything, you need just finish school." So at that time.

When the shooting was happening he told us, for example, they asked me for a rifle and I said, "I don't have any, I don't have any, I don't have any." They would send a letter. They would bring you a letter, "Beat him up because he doesn't accept the rifle." My father read in Cyrillic. And he tells by name who

got the letter in the village. He went to the police with his own letter and they beat him up. He said, “I read it and I didn’t give up because I have...” He loved learning a lot, he loved school.

And, I don’t want to say... he died in 2008 with the worry about what will happen to Kosovo, what will happen to Kosovo. He lived for 100 years, three months and seven days. But he loved school, he had money as a smith, so we had good financial conditions. We have land in the village, there were around eight hectares. He paid workers with money and he didn’t let us work it, just learn, just learn. So, everything, all the conditions that most people don’t even have today.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Those *qëkërrkat* that they made for gardens, were they popular in the city?

Isa Rexha: No, not in the city, but in villages. Not in the city because...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: They say that Pristina had a lot of gardens, that’s why...

Isa Rexha: There was Lakrishtja. They planted a lot of cabbage, that’s why it was called Lakrishte. To water the garden... I don’t know, maybe I’ll find a model and take a picture of it. In... I don’t know how to explain it. There were some buckets, but they came with their own cradle and when they fell, the water poured but it poured from aluminums out of the well, and then the water would come out in the ground. Drip water system didn’t exist, it wasn’t even thought that it would exist.

But in ‘74 he retired and since then he worked the land. He did that work even before but 80% of the work was done by the workers, but even his pension was good until ‘89 when they ruined it. There were no more pensions or anything, the pensions were poor. But we all got jobs, so he didn’t need... though everybody needs money, but he had everything. He worked the land, he would take care of the cows and so on, so his needs but also ours. So, we had everything, there were no problems.

Aurela Kadriu: Do you remember where exactly was his store?

Isa Rexha: Yes, I do. Now some from Bajgora of Lupç have it.

Aurela Kadriu: Where is it?

Isa Rexha: At... Azem Fana was in front of us. What is that thing that people from Lupç own? Before getting to the bus stop at Xhamia e Lllapit, around 20 meters before getting to the bus stop.

Part Two

Aurela Kadriu: What kind of place was the place where your father had the store?

Isa Rexha: There were two smiths. One was a little further, so it was under the Health Clinic that we used to call Ured. So, there was the Health Clinic that we called Ured, now I think it’s something about retired people, if I’m not mistaken, it isn’t a health clinic anymore. My father was there. There were no other smiths in Pristina at the time when I remember my father as a smith there. It was a privilege for him. He paid insurance back then, even though it was private, he had to pay. He had to pay insurance

as a smith. So, his pension was quite good. I'm talking about '74 until... when they started to get ruined in '89. His pension was great, he probably had everything. But he was very hardworking, he loved school a lot.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were there other craftsmen there?

Isa Rexha: There was a Roma.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did he do?

Isa Rexha: The same.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Smith?

Isa Rexha: Yes. They grinded axes... he couldn't make cars and these things, he made the cars and he grinded axes and these things. So, he was very hardworking. There was nothing that could be made... so during the war in '39, he was a soldier, in '39 my father was a soldier. He says, "I was a soldier at Beli Manastir," he would tell us... Soldier of ex-Yugoslavia, yes. And when the German bombing over Yugoslavia started, he said, "I was playing football." And from there, he first was a partisan as they were called, and then Croats got him, he was with the Croats, then Chetniks² got him. He said, he was with the Chetniks for six months, then in '42-'44 he was with Shaban Polluzha.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In Skënderaj.

Isa Rexha: Yes, he tells about a case where Shaban Polluzha and Fadil Hoxha met in Llolzhan, near Podujeva. "When they met there," he says, "they parted quite badly. Fadil and the others came back to Pristina, we went to Drenica." And then he was with Shaban Polluxha for two years.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And then when the war ended, he had this profession? Until '74...

Isa Rexha: He had this profession even earlier. He had a shop in Barileva, he grinded axes, he made stuff. And then after a while he had one in Babin Most, because as a municipality, as Barileva we were in the Municipality of Vushtrri at that time, we were in the Municipality of Vushtrri. He rented a shop in Babin Most. Most of the population in Babin Most were Serbs. Babin Most was its own municipality back then and there were... but in '60 he bought the shop at Xhamia e Llapit, so I was born in '59, he bought the shop in '60 and opened it and worked as smith until '74 when he retired. He retired in '74, but we sold it in '83 to some Bajgora from Lupç. Bajgora...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did your father tell you any stories from World War Two? For example, when he fought among Shaban Polluzha? Did he tell you any stories or any...

² Serbian movement born in the beginning of the Second World War, under the leadership of Draža Mihailović. Its name derives from *četa*, anti-Ottoman guerrilla bands. This movement adopted a Greater Serbia program and was for a limited period an anti-occupation guerrilla, but mostly engaged in collaboration with Nazi Germany, its major goal remaining the unification of all Serbs. It was responsible for a strategy of terror against non-Serbs during the Second World War and was banned after 1945. Mihailović was captured, tried and executed in 1946.

Isa Rexha: Yes, he told many stories. One day, the case that happened to four thousand people in [Tivar], the next day, as he described it, he arrived at Bar after eight hours. “They made us walk from Mitrovica,” he said, “by foot.” He was with his brother. I have two [paternal] uncles. Actually just one, the other one passed away. “We were together then we separated because we were scared if one could not walk and would get tired, either they would shoot just the brother, or both of them,” back then, if they couldn't walk, if they got tired. He also told about when they walked, “We walked from Mitrovica to Shkodra, barely ever stopping. From there we got to...” he said, “Bar...”

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Your father wasn't...

Isa Rexha: A day later, eight hours later he was at Bar. “From there they put us in some ships and took us to Bosna.” When they got to Bosnia they were captured. Some were captured by Croatian soldiers, some by Chetniks, some by Germans. So, he used to tell us that everyone who was there, around two thousand people were divided into four-five groups and were captured. They were captured... as my father used to tell us they were captured by Chetniks. He was a car mechanic, fixing, “Kosta Pacanović was my commander. I could feed 20 family members with the salary he gave me.” He said.

A Bosnian old woman helped them get away, he didn't know where he was, and then she separated him from all of them, and they were supposed to fix his car, that old woman... he knew how to tell the story. She told us, “There was a hill..” There was this and that, and she said, “Run there.” Then the Germans captured him. Then he was SS with the Germans, but he also suffered there. But he was healthy even though he suffered, he was healthy.

Aurela Kadriu: Did he tell you what he saw when he arrived at Bar after eight hours?

Isa Rexha: Yes. “It was all covered...” he said, “With clothes, with *plisa*³, with scarves, with traditional clothes. The sea was covered with clothes, they threw them with excavators in the sea.” Yes. He spoke Serbian, when he ran away in '43, when he ran from Germans... because Germans brought him to Kraveva to work, physically. And he said, “I need...” his needs and he fled through the mountain. He fled and he said. “I went...” he told us the fields, the places, and he ended up at a Serb's. He said, “I gave him my clothes...” So the army clothes, “I gave him my clothes,” and he gave him some Serbian clothes. But he spoke Serbian and said, “I am a Serb from Kosovo. I live in Kosovo.” He gave him the clothes to come, until he came to Mitrovica.

When he came to Mitrovica with Serbian clothes, he got off the train, he came with Serbian clothes. I'm telling you what he told us. When he came to Mitrovica four people with national wear, with rifles on their shoulders, he said, “They followed me to get me somewhere to kill me. Then...” He said, “I didn't dare speak to them, to tell them that I'm Albanian, I didn't dare do anything.” Luckily he met his father's [paternal] uncle in the city, he didn't recognize him with those clothes, but my father recognized him. His uncle was in the market, it was market day in Mitrovica and he talked to him... now they found out he was Albanian. When they found he was Albanian, “Not even,” he said, “Ten

³ Traditional white felt conic cap, differs from region to region, distinctively Albanian.

minutes and they brought me other clothes to wear.” And they accompanied him home. But, after ten says he joined the brigade of Shaban Polluzha. He was with them then.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: And from that part...

[The interview stops and another part of the story continues]

Isa Rexha: It had Union, that is privatized now, it had Tre Sheshirat, it had Rugova, it had Aferdita, which isn't sold today, and Villa Gërmia which still exists. Then there was Kosova, a hotel in Fushë Kosova, Dashishku bought it. It was in Dardania, Aktash, it had its locations. But among others there were the Shock Absorber canteen, the Naperdaku canteen, they made furniture there, there was the Post Office canteen, so our workers kept the maintenance in those canteens. We maintained them until '89 when the violent measures began.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Acronym for what is SLOGA?

Isa Rexha: SLOGA, hospitality. From Serbian to Albanian it means hospitality, union. SLOGA is union. After the war we called Kosovo Tourist Hospitality Company, back then it was SLOGA Tourist Hospitality Company. The Union of Hospitality, it is SLOGA in that sense.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did the violent measures appear in SLOGA? What changes did you notice?

Isa Rexha: From '81...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Restrictions, or should I call them?

Isa Rexha: From '81, there was no calmness in Kosovo. There were protests time after time, there were demonstrations in the streets. There was no quiet even from Albanians. But Serbia began to pressure the Albanian people there in Kosovo a lot. But, organizations started then, LDK [The Democratic League of Kosovo], some.... And the Albanian Syndicate. The big protest started. It was like whoever didn't go on September 1... all Albanians to not go to work, to boycott it, and whoever didn't go to work would get fired, they started not going to work. That's when Serbian started with the violent measures on organizations, back then there weren't any private ones, just social, so they began with the violent measures and the Assembly of Serbia for Kosovo chose the directors.

Now I am talking about when they started here. The violent measures started, they came... a Serbian man, he was Montenegrin. He didn't accept them because there is... there was Jovica Ivančević, who in '74... because I knew him, I knew him because of the job, I knew Jovica very well. I knew him and I knew who he was. In '74, he was the only one, he had four people, but he was the director who sent a letter to Tito and said, “Be careful what you're doing with Kosovo.” When he gave autonomy in '74. In '89 when the Assembly of Serbia started the violent measures in Kosovo, he was the only one from Serbia, he was Montenegrin... I heard that he died, I don't know if it's true. He is the only one who sent a letter to Miloš and said, “You're very late and you're very wrong.” And he was against the violent measures. He didn't accept them. Even though he was Montenegrin, another Montenegrin sent that. He was Montenegrin but he accepted the violent measures of Serbia.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was he a Serb from Kosovo or Montenegrin?

Isa Rexha: The one that used to be there before was a Montenegrin from Kosovo. Yes, yes, he was a resident here and the other one who came was Montenegrin, he was also living here but he accepted the violent measures of Serbia. He accepted to work in the way they said. They used all kinds of methods to make people leave. Until...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did they fire people from work here?

Isa Rexha: Yes, yes, yes. From around 800 workers that there used to be... when I say 800 I mean on SLOGA level, there are 18 locations. There were around 380 workers just at Grand, just at Grand...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Albanians, or in general?

Isa Rexha: Well there were around, 10 percent were Serbian, and let's also say Turkish, so around 20 percent and 80 percent were Albanian. I'm talking since '74 and on when the structure was improved. Now they had to fire people because they brought Serbs from there, from Serbia and everywhere and they hired them here. They promised them good salaries. They used all kinds of methods. Until they couldn't make them leave in any other way, they made some clothing with four S-es which Serbia has on the flag...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Oh, S-es, okay.

Isa Rexha: Yes, four S-es that it has, they, so now I don't need to say what do they mean. And they wore it on the part of the jacket, in this part, so it can be seen. And now four crucifixes, four S-es, nobody wanted to wear those. We, the ones that were working in the administration offices, I'm talking about myself, they didn't offer me to wear that. The waiters, chefs, cleaners, just a part, not to everyone, but, to one part, yes. Who got them they removed those four S-es, they were in this part, and they didn't wear those.

Isa Rexha: A bakery in the year '94, a bakery from Italy, a place to buy bread, Arkan brought it here, because there was a big lack of bread at that time. And the bakery was, and, to this day, it's placed down below, but it's not the same bakery...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: The one underneath here?

Isa Rexha: No, no, no, the store was here...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes, the store, yes...

Isa Rexha: The store was here, and bakery was down there, so they took that bakery when they went, the bakery is not there anymore, their bakery. And when they produced that bread, in order for Albanians not to buy it, they made a crucifix when they cut it, they made crucifixes. So the way bread is, they cut it in this part, they made four-five parts, and they cut it in this part with a crucifix, and

Albanians endured hunger, there was enough bread to buy in here, and they didn't buy it. The store was here, right down here was sale. In Arkan's time...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did they come in '94? They just moved to live here or how, how did they move?

Isa Rexha: Arkan was from here. Arkan was from here...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I know, I know, but in Grand how did...

Isa Rexha: He came to live...

Aurela Kadriu: Do you remember that day, how...

Isa Rexha: Ah no, they came one by one. He came, he came with his group, Arkan. Arkan was from here, a resident of Kosovo, I don't know from where exactly. Then things started to get a lot rougher for Albanians. They banned them from here, they even beat them up. Since then they began, Zoran Anđelković⁴ came and became a resident of Grand, in Tito's residence. In front there's another residence, on this side {shows with his hands}, also Tito's, but it wasn't called Tito's then, because there was the big one. He slept there, Arkan and his people. They slept there. They bought special furniture from Simpos for them and they lived here...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you feel the pressure? Since he was there.

Isa Rexha: The waiters, the cooks, those who were in contact with them, especially the waiters. But, they also get into the kitchen. They were pressured and they fired most of them. So, from... I wanted to mention earlier, from 820 employees, I'm not sure exactly but 822-823, there were only 72 Albanians left on the level of SLOGA, most of them were Serbian. So, from 820 employees, there were only 72 left... I am talking about '95-'96 until '97 when I quit. We were...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Would Albanians clients come?

Isa Rexha: No, no, very few. But at that time there were many foreign journalists, there were many foreign ambassadors, foreign diplomats who followed the situation...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Has there ever been an incident inside?

Isa Rexha: Yes, they beat up a lot of employees, or they recognized on the streets, took them and beat them up here, it happened a lot. But, I don't know. They didn't have problems with the personnel, they fired them but they didn't beat them up, they just fired them automatically. They didn't want to know where they are, when they are, when they're not here. So, they were suspicious and they didn't want to know. At some point... if they wanted to beat up someone, they took them from the street, beat them up here and took them back to the street.

⁴ The speaker thinks of Željko Ražnatović - Arkan, but says another name.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Which part did they use?

Isa Rexha: Usually they used the basements downstairs. Where after the war, it is suspected that in the bowling alley, that I said existed at the time, it's suspected that there were burned people there. KFOR took some samples, some dust, some... but they didn't give us any answers about what it was, what was there, what kind of dust is it, what was burned there. That is five stories down from here.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did they look like? Were they civilians or Arkan's group...

Isa Rexha: All civilians, all civilians. So, inside Grand there were... Grand had people in different uniforms or something. Inside there were all civilians, none of them were in uniforms.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you know what they did there? I mean we know what they did, but were they preparing for it? Were they getting data on what was happening here...

Isa Rexha: They observed the territory and they intervened where they needed to intervene, wherever they could they gathered people and beat them up, not only here, everywhere. But, I told you earlier that Zoran Anđelković had a room here, he was a permanent resident of the Grand Hotel. He was above the army, but he had the command here. And during the war, I said, the police, the army, they were all situated at Grand. But, luckily Grand wasn't bombarded or anything. The same thing that I experienced, in the beginning when I started working at Grad, I experienced the same thing from '99 when I started working. Because I...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you quit... let's not get there immediately... how did you quit the job at Grand? How did you decide to leave in '97?

Isa Rexha: The pressure started, they started, "You are KLA, you are..." then I withdrew and engaged in the KLA. I was in the KLA until... August 11, June 11. I was the first Albanian to get into Grand, as a civilian, the first Albanian. And... I was the last to leave...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Why did you stay?

Isa Rexha: No, because I knew... I know everything about Grand Hotel, everything, I don't wanna say it but I also knew how many spoons there were, because I did the balancing, registration, balancing. There isn't a point in Grand Hotel that I don't know in detail. I know the rooms better, so to say, rather than the host. I know the storehouse better than the storehouse worker does, or used to. I know better what was in the storehouse rather than the storehouse worker, or the kitchen the inventory they used. Because I dealt every month, at least once a month with them. Registrations, balancing, so...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you have your spoons, since you mentioned spoons, were they engraved? Who made those?

Isa Rexha: Well, we ordered them... We had them, but now, since you wanna know about the inventory at the time when Grand hotel was built, Tito, I am talking about Tito again, he brought his own inventory for 300 people all silver, silver inventory for 300 people. When I say 300 people, I mean with all of it. With exceptions, what couldn't be in silver, was crystal, first-class crystal. The silver

inventory was made by FanNipa from Prizren, Famipa from Prizren. I am telling you there was a special care, the reality of how it's good to accept a... It's very special that the noble inventory, how we used to call it back then, silver, noble, was checked by Serbian police every six months. One single thing couldn't be missing. Now we can say people took them, but I am convinced that no one took anything.

When we came after the war and we did the first registration... because now, I have to talk about something... since we're talking about after the war, I want to say something about my biography. When I first came here there was a, in the beginning, there was that director who was removed by the violent measures, Milan Gurović, Serb from here and when I came here he was the director. And there was a mediator between Serbs and Albanians in... [his phones rings] Uh, excuse me. It's mine, it's mine.

Part Three

Isa Rexha: When I came here... now for the mediator between Serbs and Albanians to start working here, to go back to Albanians, there was an English officer, he was called Bernard. Benet, Bentet. And he called me here, the one who came in earlier {shows with his hands} he was the general director in the level of SLOGA. Now he is our director here. And they called me here, so there was the director, the Serb, and there was the representative of Albanians Zekë Çeku, now he deals with hotels and tourism, I respect him a lot. So they called me to coordinate with the registration, acceptance and delivery commission between Serbs and Albanians, because Gurović wanted to go on vacation, he asked for his yearly vacation.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: He wanted to go to vacation immediately after the war?

Isa Rexha: Immediately after the war. But he didn't want to work with Albanians, he wanted to take advantage of that. And they called me here in the office, Benet said to the Serb, "Appoint someone as a member of the commission for the acceptance - delivery of the object, because you have to deliver it to Zeka." Now I... Gurović knew me well, I did the registration in his time and he knew me well. He said, "From our side..." he said, "Isa is appointed." Gurović knew me well. He said, "From our side..." he said, "Isa is appointed." Gurović.

Now he addressed Zeka, he was writing in his notebook, "Appoint the commission from your side, who is the head of the commission?" And Zeka knew me because I worked with him in '85-'86 with Zeka, and Zeka knew me well. He said, "It is Isa from our side also." "Good." He addressed Gurović and said, "The second member?" He said, "From me, the second member is Isa." Now addresses Zeka, the director of Grand, have you heard of him, Sabri Mikullovc? He said to the Serb, "The third member?" He says to Zeka, he didn't tell him to appoint it, he was going, he wasn't waiting. He said, "The third?" He appointed Ajvaz Rama.

The first job that interested the Albanians, to make the cash register. We made the cash register, we found 44 thousand marks. And the second job, that I was interested in, that I knew we had to do was the depot of the noble or silver inventory. And I did the registration. And I took the registration of '86 when I did it on 31.12 at the end of the year and compared it to '99 so when we came back here. Believe me that only two crystal glasses were missing. All of those that were silver were there. It is interesting because this table that was worked in gold flames...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do they still exist?

Isa Rexha: Now unfortunately the majority doesn't exist. These all happen after privatization. Not that they get it, the privatization happened, not to say... my niece is calling me [addresses the interviewers].

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Answer it.

[The interview is interrupted so the interviewee can speak in the phone]

The location of SOLGA, some aren't sold yet but Grand was sold on August 10 in 2006. But, officially they had time to make the payments for three more months. So, on 13.11 Grand was officially privatized.

But, before the war, so after the war when we were at the noble inventory depot there was nothing missing, only two crystal glasses. After the privatization, they took them, not to say, from glasses, spoons, knives, forks, a plate... from curiosity to see, to those candle holders that were worked in gold flames. We always called the depot as the noble inventory depot. After they privatized it, PAK [Privatization Agency of Kosovo] took it back, there is around 50 percent of it missing.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: 50 percent?

Isa Rexha: 50 percent is missing.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Who took them, or how, what happened?

Isa Rexha: Well now who took them...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I mean, what happened? What do you suppose happened?

Isa Rexha: Well occasionally the depot is opened during the night, nothing breaks. The depot opens and closes, nothing is broken, the inventory is missing. I mean...

Aurela Kadriu: Did that 50 percent disappear immediately?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Or gradually?

Isa Rexha: No, no, gradually. Once I reported one that was broken. I reported that it was opened and they took it, this noble inventory is missing. But there was no reaction, PAK didn't react as they should have. Because I told you earlier, when the Serbs were here, they did the registration every six months.

After the war, Albanians were here also before the war, in the '80s until '89 nothing was ever missing, because the registration was done, but nothing was ever missing.

In the time when Serbs were here, '89 until '99, nothing was missing, they were missing from then on. They didn't react. And when the employees saw that they didn't react more things started missing. And a lot of things were missing. They are gone. I have the list of the things that are missing. It's worthless... because that inventory came in '78, it was Tito's reputation. With Tito's receipt. Fampita from Prizren worked all of it with silver crystal.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were there many artists who did paintings for rooms? Do you know the story of that art collection that was gathered at Grand?

Isa Rexha: They're in a depot if I'm not wrong in room 309, they are under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture. They gathered them in a room. Excluding this rug, this carpet and that painting that are still hanging on the wall. Otherwise all the others are in that depot.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What is their status?

Isa Rexha: The Ministry decides on them, we just gathered them.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were they property, were they inventory of Grand?

Isa Rexha: Yes, yes, yes they were. They were, they were more... like gifts for Grand. But, they were also paid in a way. They were also paid. We have two sculptures that are, one is on this floor, the other one is at the reception. The one here is made out of wood, the other one is bronze, at the reception, they are also paid. Çavderbasha, their family is trying to get them, but I think they don't have the right to take them because they were paid at that time. Grand had money, they're all paid.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do they have some kind of cultural heritage status now, or what?

Isa Rexha: Well, they took them. They're under the supervision of the Ministry. They come at least once a year and do the registration, if something is missing.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were they damaged, can you tell us a little about them?

Isa Rexha: No, no, no. They're preserved, they were always on the walls, so they weren't on the ground, they weren't broken. And, not to say it, but when it comes to books and paintings, Albanians don't steal these things (laughs).

Aurela Kadriu: Are they folded in the room are they...

Isa Rexha: Yes, yes, yes. They're under control. But, they didn't take them, no one needed them. The books are all here also.

Aurela Kadriu: What is Grand for you today? Can you tell what is happening, what is happening at Grand today?

Isa Rexha: Grand today, I think that since it was built in '78, Kosovo was known through Grand. They found Grand, they found Kosovo. Today, Grand is no one. But these were interests, when the selling happened it was the clans' interests. Here, when Božur was sold, it was sold in the amount of one million and 650 thousand euros, 30 percent was the owner of Grand, five percent was Pacolli and five percent was Remzi Ejupi. I know, because I was dealing with finances, I know how the payments came.

When Grand was sold 40 percent were from the man from Silkapor, that produces blocks, Zylqif Berisha, 40 percent. But on the outside there was Pacolli and 20 percent Remzi Ejupi. Now in Božur, Pacolli bought the shares from them, he didn't sell the shares. Zylqif didn't sell the shares in Božur. Pacolli and Remzi Ejupi wanted to get him out... they made a deal so they would buy all the blocks at his factory. Then their reports went bad, they didn't take them and wanted to get him out.

They got him out and let him be part of the investments, Božur, now Swiss Diamond, the owner of the Silkapo, Zylqif Berisha. He tried to get them out of Grand, but Grand was a big bite for him, he was a small fish for them and they bankrupted him. They did not fix Grand, they destroyed it. They totally destroyed it. If you go to that other part it's horrible, you would be scared to pass by there.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What about the facade...

Isa Rexha: This facade was done on the outside, inside only the walls were broken...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did you think of this facade because you're used to seeing Grand in marble and brown...

Isa Rexha: Yes, yes, yes. We are used to seeing it but this is very damaging to the tiles that are outside. Even though, now the Ministry of Culture wants a part... in way it has put Grand under protection also. But, it's wrong, I mean as far as the facade is concerned. It's wrong if they don't insist on tightening these tiles. From '77 when these tiles were put here, a part of them is falling. One tile is 18 kilos. Now imagine if it falls from the twelfth floor. One fell here in front on the concrete, they made a half a meter hole in the ground, one tile. That's why we put some debris netting, so that if it falls it won't fall over the guests, but its speed is reduced, to break, so small parts will fall, you can't do anything about it. So that's why those nets are outside, we put them there a long time ago.

In developed countries they aren't allowed to put tiles higher than a story. No, no. They can facade them to look like tiles, but to work with marble, because this is marble, it isn't a game. But, when you calculate it, 18 meters... because they're joined with screws, but these tiles are also joined with cement. Now calculate it, if one falls down, 18 kilos, until it falls down it will weigh 500 kilos or more. I think that if the Ministry tried, they just put them there without asking anyone. It's wrong if they don't let it here. It will fall on someone's head and kill them.

Now they've destroyed it, they brought it to that level, it's personal interests. They rented Grand, we don't work on anything. I don't work on anything, I am the auditor, there's nothing at Grand. At Grand, there's no assurance at Grand, this is how it is at Grand, there's no guests. We get our salaries from PAK from the rent they pay. Downstairs is Devolli, there in front... of our offices there's Pacolli.

Someone rented some of the offices, someone else rented the others. So, we get the rent by PAK, we get our salaries. They were small salaries.

In 2012 in the eighth month, they let us self-finance, in 2008, not 2012, sorry. In 2012 in the eighth month when they took... the former owner, they left us left finances until 2015. The lowest wage was 400 euros. But, not without a reason, but we paid for work experience, we paid the night shift, we paid for extra hours, we gave bonuses. So, the lowest wage was 400 euros. But the base was, for example, 150 euros. In the second month of 2015 they put us into liquidation. They put us into liquidation, they claimed they had to fire 50 percent of the employees. We were 98 employees, they wanted to fire 60. We accepted. They conditioned us, but it was mostly a condition to accept the low salaries. We won't fire anyone... but for example, my salary was 500 euros, then 250, 50-50. And we accepted.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were the employees paid, did they get any shares from the sale of Grand?

Isa Rexha: Yes. They took 20 percent from the sale, I mean from SLOGA, not from Grand, when it got sold as SLOGA. We took 20 percent. It wasn't a big sum in general, around four thousand per employee. It depended on work experience, but around four thousand euros per employee. So we accepted that. They have ruined to that point where I tell someone Grand works, "Hey, Grand hasn't worked for years." Yes, Grand works, Grand functions. It has the rooms, it has everything.

They don't allow us to be supplied with food, so they closed our kitchen. If guests would come today we wouldn't have anywhere to serve them coffee, I mean lunch, dinner or breakfast. They left us with a buffet, for guests and for us, it was called TV hall, it is still called TV hall. We have two rooms for meetings, the others are for rent. We have rooms, but what's...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you use these rooms for meetings?

Isa Rexha: Yes. But the worst thing is that there's no internet. So, foreign journalists don't come here. The reason is because there's no internet... even though they come here, they come to work, they can't work without internet. We put Wi-Fi on some floors but I told you that the walls are made of concrete and they're very thick, the waves can't go through. The guests have to get out in the hallway to connect to the Wi-Fi, it doesn't work.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Thank you very much.