

INTERVIEW WITH REXHEP FERRI

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Duration: 203 minutes

Present:

1. Rexhep Ferri (Speaker)
2. Erëmirë Krasniqi (Interviewer)
3. Kaltrina Krasniqi (Camera)
4. Jakup Ferri (Rexhep Ferri's son)
5. Renea Begolli (Camera assistant)

Symbols in transcription, nonverbal communication:

() - emotional communication

{ } - the interlocutor explains some gestures.

Other rules of transcription:

[] - addition to the text to help understand

Footnotes are add-ons that provide information about places, names or expressions.

Part One

Rexhep Ferri: Albanian history is more legend rather than history. I say this because not only my generation, but even my grandfather's generation {moves his hand} was educated and brought up and formed their personality more from legends, myths, rather than from written history. We also learned cursive writing very late, not only in Cyrillic or Latin, or Arabic, because we were always close to the enemy. Among Albanian people, the families that were known before, we remember their doings in history, they had a tragic life, huge faith in, in their life and in, in their manliness to also keep their personality. Those families have finished their mission, so even their graves are almost lost. We don't have graves, we have a grave in Plav¹ {holds one finger up}. Our origin, our origin is from Plav, Jakup Ferri, there's one grave {holds one finger up}. But, the generation which kept Albanians in their territory were our patriots who are not like today's patriots.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you explain what they were like?

Rexhep Ferri: They gave everything. A simple example, Haxhi Zeka² in Peja was a very well-known man. They called him Haxhi Zeka Byberi, he didn't have children and he sold his assets and gave money to other people, "Go buy weapons because I'm old. I don't have a son to send to war, buy weapons and go to war." Hasan Prishtina³ used his wealth to be able to do national work, honorable work for his people. Hasan Prishtina was a person who was very well-known even at the sultan's royal court in Istanbul. So, my family was among these families, these great tragic families. They fought and died during four wars, they fought and died and they didn't inherit anything. They left us on the streets. I remember as a kid when my father was a teacher in Kukës.

¹ Plav and Gusinje, a locality in Montenegro with a large Albanian population.

² Haxhi Zeka (1832-1902) was an Albanian nationalist leader and member of the League of Peja, an alliance which in 1899 tried to negotiate autonomy for Albanians within the Ottoman Empire. In this process, a truce was declared among people involved in feuds in order to unite against the Ottomans.

³ Hasan Prishtina (1873-1933) was an Albanian politician, known as Hasan Berisha before he became the Prishtina delegate to the Ottoman Parliament. He led the 1912 uprising in Kosovo against the Young Turks and after the declaration of independence of Albania he held several posts in the Albanian government including the one of Prime Minister. He was assassinated in Thessaloniki on the orders of King Zog.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What year was he there?

Rexhep Ferri: Well 85 years ago, 80 something... I am 83 now.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Mhm, I believe it must be during the '40s, 1940.

Rexhep Ferri: I don't know, no, before that. And as a big family, I have to start with the First Balkan War, when Europe gave Plav and Gusinje to Montenegro, Plav and Gusinje, Ulcinj and Tivar. It gave Kosovo to Serbia, and during that war, three of Jakup Ferri's⁴ sons and two nephews were killed, my grandfather was in Istanbul, and he came from Istanbul to Shkodra and he gathered his brothers' family and he took them to Shkodra. At that time in Shkodra, it was my father and two other children of my grandfather's murdered brothers, Riza Ferri and Shemsi Ferri, my grandfather was Hasan Ferri. They were in school in Shkodra, and Hasan Prishtina, since he was friends with Jakup, with Hasan Ferri, he asked for three of Jakup Ferri's sons, three of his nephews to let them go study in Italy. My grandfather Hasan didn't send his son, my father, but he sent the two sons of his murdered brother, Shemsi Ferri and Riza Ferri.

My mother would tell me, she said, "Father was hurt because he was prepared to go study, and they took Riza and Shemsi to Puka {points left} and Migjen there, taking a salary as a teacher." So he didn't take my father, my father was sent to Tropoja. He got married in Tropoja. At that time, 90 percent of people of Tropoja weren't educated, but they had the school of life, much more ethically valuable than what we have today. The teacher who taught, [the educational system] had established a practice. They would send them [the teachers] to open another school somewhere. They took him from Tropoja to Puka {points left} to open a school, my father. They brought a new teacher to Tropoja, he laid some foundations there. From Puka, they took him to Kukës, where I was born.

I remember in Kukës, I was three years old, two years old, and the first thing I remember, I remember that the house we were renting was a two-story oriental house. We were on the second floor and the windows were facing a main street, a long street, it seemed like a long street to me. I'm talking about when I was three years old, two and a half years old. I remember when my mother went to the window, and so did I, and she beat me {moves his hand} and I remember a little old woman {holds up his finger} who always stayed close to me, she was my grandmother, my mother's mother. I don't remember if she had a face, or not. I just know she was small and had a dark brown dress with white polka dots, that's all I remember. [I remember her] like a silhouette, now I'm talking figuratively like it was the beginning (laughs) of this that I became a painter.

⁴ Jakup Ferri (c.1832 – 1879) was a notable Albanian fighter from Plav and Gusinje who served as a local leader in the League of Prizren's resistance during the Principality of Montenegro's attempt to subjugate his homeland in 1879. He was distinguished in the Battle of Novšiće, where he died.

And then the war of Italy got to Albania, Hitler was on the other side, and then the border broke and somehow it became, not Greater Albania, we shouldn't say that, but Ethnic Albania, because it's more clear and more correct. Ethnic Albania, Albania of those Albanians, of the lands that are theirs. And Ernest Koliqi⁵ was a very honorable writer, a very respected figure from Shkodra, he studied in Italy, at that time he was Minister of Culture and Education. Even though it was Italy's reign, they put Albanians [in lead positions] in institutions and he brought Albanian school to Kosovo, and all of those Albanians who originated from Kosovo, and when I say from Kosovo, you don't know, and a lot of Albanians from Kosovo don't know that, Kosovo is called all the land outside of the border that today is Albania. Mujo Ulqinaku,⁶ from Ulcinj who was killed in Durrës, is referred to as Kosovar.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: This was a term that was used to refer to...

Rexhep Ferri: For everyone, since Kosovo was a bigger territory, and all other territories {opens his hands} that were not inside the border of Albania were called Kosovars and Kosovo. Now there are Albanians from Montenegro, Albanians from Kosovo, Albanians from Macedonia, Albanians from Presevo, like a *mahalla*.⁷ And they appointed my father to go to Plav and open an Albanian school.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So he went back to his family?

Rexhep Ferri: Eh. And we went back, we went back. I remember, I don't remember how we went back, I just remember in Prizren at the fountain, the truck that took us there stopped near a tree, it was a truck or I don't know what. My mother was with me and my brother, I was three, four years old, my sisters were born later in Plav. My father went back to Plav, he left when he was ten years old and then he went back to open an Albanian school. In all of those territories there, in villages, in Plav, Gusinje, he opened Albanian schools there. My three sisters were born in Plav, and I don't remember, but my mother does, my father took out a *lira*⁸ {pretends to take something out of his pocket} he had in his pocket and gave it to...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Your mother.

Rexhep Ferri: My mother, he said, "Put it somewhere in the drawer," and I saw it and went and took it, I went to the city and I looked for a necklace {touches his neck}, necklace with charms like sweets for

⁵ Ernest Koliqi (1903-1975) was a Shkodra-born writer and a poet educated in Italy and a citizen of Italy after the advent of Communism in Albania. During the Second World War he was Minister of Education of the Albanian Kingdom, which included a large part of Kosovo.

⁶ Mujo Ulqinaku (born Mujo Cakuli; 1896-1939) was an Albanian sergeant of the Royal Albanian Navy, known for his resistance on 7 April 1939 to the Italian forces during the Italian invasion of Albania. He was given the People's Hero of Albania award posthumously.

⁷ Word of Arabic origin that means neighborhood.

⁸ *Lira* is the name of several currency units. It is the current currency of Turkey and the name of the former currencies, including those of Italy, Malta and Israel. The term originates from the value of a Roman pound (Latin: *libra*, about 329g, 10.58 troy ounces) of high purity silver.

my sister, for Drita who has passed away, and I asked for a necklace. He said, he said to me... I don't remember this but my mother said that the owner of the store said to me {as if he's holding a coin}, "Take this to your mother and tell her you wanted to buy a necklace for your sister, but this coin doesn't work, take other coins and come back." And I said to my mother, "This doesn't work, I wanted to buy it." This is my first memory. Then a later memory when people came over to our house, our yard would be crowded because we were a big house. The popularity sometimes comes at a cost.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you have family in Plav when you went back?

Rexhep Ferri: Yes, we were...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I mean extended family.

Rexhep Ferri: Yes, extended family, we were, Jakup Ferri's nephews had grown up, they were {counts with his fingers} of them was head of *Balli Kombëtar*,⁹ the other was the mayor, my father was the director of the school, of all schools there, volunteer leader, they went to war, to fight, it was war time. They came to our yard, we had a big yard. They could come with horse carriages, we didn't have an army, a disciplined army with generals, officers, with, with... they came to take corn, they took it as if they were in their own house, they took as much as they wanted for the soldiers. And these were the paths of the patriots of those times, not the ones that are now.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was the Second World War reflected in your yard? I'm interested to know how they were organized?

Rexhep Ferri: And it was, it was, he had, our family had connection with the village {points straight} of [Zenun Çelaj](#), Qosja.

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Plav?

Rexhep Ferri: No, no the village...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Gusinje?

Rexhep Ferri: No, no, Gusinje is a small town, this one, where is Rexhep Qosja¹⁰ from?

Jakup Ferri: Vuthaj, no?

⁹ *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.

¹⁰ Rexhep Qosja (1936) is an Albanian writer and literary critic from a part of Malësia in modern Montenegro (where locally the region is known as *Malesija*).

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Vuthaj.

Rexhep Ferri: Vuthaj, we were mostly connected to Vuthaj, we had friendships with them and always... Because there's a tragedy within the Albanian nation that for centuries has cost us, then and now. Back then in Plav and Gusinje, they spoke Serbian, because Albanian was considered a peasant language. There was no one educated in Albanian schools, there were Bosniaks and even in Plav and Gusinje, Serbian language was spoken, in the villages of Plav and Gusinje up to Vuthaj Albanian was spoken, and they were Albanians as well. And everyone from the village came to our house because they were volunteers in the war, and there was a man Çelaj, a cousin of Zenun Çelaj, and my mother gave him food, he left five bullets, the bullet package {shows with his hands} for my father. "Give these to Shaban because I'm going to war and I will not come back," he said to my mother. He felt it.

After two or three hours I'm guessing, not more, within a day, I remember they brought his body to our yard. My mother took a sheet and puts it over his clothes {shows with his hands} because he was wearing *tirqi*¹¹ and they covered him and took him away. And I remember when I got sick once, these were my first memories in Plav, there would come... I don't know what to call them, they weren't beggars but some kind of fortune tellers, they would walk around {moves his hands in front of him}. They came, my mother and I went outside and they looked at me, they looked to see if there was any radiation of life or not, how do I know, I was very little. The ground underneath my feet started trembling {shakes his hands} and there was a wood stub near and I hopped there to save myself, I was so little that I thought that's how I'll save myself because the ground was trembling. And I yelled and got sick, and I know I suffered from that trauma for a long time.

And then, when the war ended. I can't judge Albanians why they went to war in Spain {raises his hand to the left} to make Spain communist, while in their own state, their nation was a mess, they had nothing in their hands. But anyway, at that time, it was idealized to be a communist, all youth of Europe had communist ideals.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did these ideas circulate, do you have any...

Rexhep Ferri: Well, in Albania at that time, Tajar Zavalani translated *Mother* by Maxim Gorky. All the youth of Albania who were in school were reading *Mother* by Maxim Gorky. In the morning when they saw that your eyes were a little swollen {touches his eyes}, "Ah, he read last night, he didn't sleep all night, he read." {points to himself} Tajar Zavalani who translated it, realized early on what communism is and took off and started working for Radio London. My mother listened to it a lot, {puts his hand at his ear} "Communism will fall today, communism will fall tomorrow." How people go from one extreme to another. When we went back to Gjakova...

¹¹ Tight-fitting embroidered white flannel breeches with decorative braids at the bottom of the legs and on the pockets, traditional Albanian wear.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you decide to go to Gjakova, or how, how did it come to that...

Rexhep Ferri: Because they confiscated all our wealth and my father, my father didn't, my father left, he didn't... he thought he would be safe in Gjakova, that he wouldn't need to leave his family because starting from Fadil Hoxha¹² to Sahit Bakalli,¹³ they were classmates and he was a teacher along with them in the Gjakova Highlands. We met Sahit Bakalli, before we met them... and Sahit Bakalli said, "Look, Shaban, you can't be in Gjakova tonight. We can't save you from Serbs and Montenegrins, because you are Jakup Ferri's nephew, Hasan Ferri's, Riza Ferri's brother, Shemsi Ferri's brother, who led the war against partisans and you were with them. You have to go to Albania, to Tropoja, where you were a teacher, where your in-law family is and maybe this will pass and you will be safe somehow." He accompanied him out of the city and my father went there, and we remained there.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You stayed in Gjakova?

Rexhep Ferri: We stayed in Gjakova. My mother would work all night with a loom, she would take it on Monday morning to a highlander, but sometimes when a person is lonely, if there is a person who knows a few Albanian words, it feels like he's your brother. He would call my mother sister and she would call him brother, they weren't even from the same village or city, but from Gjakova Highlands. Pashkë, I would call him Uncle Peshk [Fish]. He didn't go to school, but he would smoke {pretend to smoke} like an aristocrat — it seemed so to me — with a pipe. And my mother would sell those clothes to him, the ones she made with the loom, and he would tell her a bunch of lies, "Mrs. Hatixhe, I heard on the Radio London last night that communism won't last even the week *tap-rrap* {onomatopoeia}." And my mother would get through that week with that lie. Then the next Monday would come and he would tell her another lie, and years went by, we grew up.

Part Two

Erëmirë Krasniqi: We were talking about the news your mother would get about communism.

Rexhep Ferri: Yes.

¹² Fadil Hoxha (1916-2001) was an Albanian Communist partisan leader from Gjakova, who held a number of high posts in Kosovo and Yugoslavia, including the rotating post of Vice President of the Federal Presidency, the highest leadership post in Yugoslavia under Tito, in 1978-79. He retired in 1986, but was expelled from the League of Communist on charges of nationalism.

¹³ Founding member of OZNA in Kosovo (Serb. *Odsjek za Zaštitu Naroda*). OZNA an acronym for Department of National Security, the Yugoslav security service operating between 1944 and 1946, notorious for the establishment of a regime comparable to the KGB terror in Russia.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you explain this, is this about the hope she had for communism to end and the family would be together again?

Rexhep Ferri: Well, for those who lose the war, losing the war of those who won, is a win for them. The loss of communism, in other words, the influence of the Slavs in the Albanian lands would lose its value, would lose its rule. Because in Gjakova, communists from Gjakova from Fadil Hoxha¹⁴ and on, they couldn't protect my father from Serbs, and they said, "Leave within the night, Shaban." And hope keeps people going, and honestly we were brought up by a mother who wasn't educated, who didn't have a profession, profitable profession, yes. And we grew up on bad terms with the people in power.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: They were on bad terms with you.

Rexhep Ferri: They would come to check in on us during the night from SUP,¹⁵ some of them were illiterate, they worked for them and they would come to check in on us.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Would they ask you questions? What kind of check-up was it?

Rexhep Ferri: "Where is your husband?" They would ask my mother. And my mother would not open the door. A neighbor of ours was communist, Qumil Xuna. She would say, "Go call Qamil Xuna, I will open the door for him, I will not open the door for you." They came, they would come time after time and then we were forced to leave Gjakova and go to my [maternal] aunt, a village ten kilometers outside of Gjakova, Bobaj in Boga, to get away from them.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes, yes.

Rexhep Ferri: But they would come there as well, because they were also from villages. And I don't know when they took them, they took the gramophone {counts on his fingers}, they took the radio, they took the records. Zogu¹⁶ had published around five gramophone records, for big gramophones {shows the size with his hands} in Bulgaria, at first the plaques were published in Albanian and they took them. The typewriter, in all of Gjakova there might have been two typewriters {shows two fingers}, my mother had my father's typewriter. One of them took them, my mother remembered. I'll tell this story later or I will continue...

¹⁴ Fadil Hoxha (1916-2001), Albanian Communist partisan leader from Gjakova, who held a number of high posts in Kosovo and Yugoslavia, including the rotating post of Vice President of the Federal Presidency, the highest leadership post in Yugoslavia under Tito, in 1978-79. He retired in 1986, but was expelled from the League of Communist on charges of nationalism.

¹⁵ SUP - Acronym for *Sekretarijat unutrašnjih poslova*, which translates to the Secretariat of Internal Affairs, of the Yugoslav Socialist Federal Republic.

¹⁶ Zog I (1895-1961) born Ahmed Muhtar bey Zogolli, taking the name Ahmet Zogu in 1922, was the leader of Albania from 1922 to 1939. At age 27, he first served as Albania's youngest ever prime minister (1922-1924), then as president (1925-1928), and finally as king (1928-1939).

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Continue.

Rexhep Ferri: I will continue. After 30 years or 25 years, the person who took it was now working as a person who comes to see how much electricity you spent. And my mother recognized him, even though so many years had passed, and she said, “Come on in,” she said, “I want to make you a coffee.” He was shocked, he.... What does this woman want? At this point my mother was older, back then she was young and beautiful. “No, no,” she said, “come on, do you remember when you came?” She said, “You took,” she said, {counts with his fingers} “My husband’s typewriter, the radio, gramophone, the vinyl records, this and that,” she said, “and you never brought them back.” Now he didn’t...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: He wasn’t in power anymore.

Rexhep Ferri: Yes, and I thought, “Who is this woman talking to, who is she bickering with?” I went out and saw them, he was in the doorway {puts his hand in front of himself}, she didn’t let him come in, she said all of this to him in the doorway, he didn’t even check how much electricity we had spent. He was a fat man, red, he got even more red from embarrassment. I know that he had a red face like he looked straight at the sun. And he left, he didn’t check the electricity or anything. So within that time, the time when he came to measure our spendings, my 17-year-old brother was in the same class as Ali Podrimja¹⁷ and they talked about leaving, going to Albania. It was interesting in Serbia’s time, when Fadil Hoxha went there, and all of them, they went to school there because there wasn’t an Albanian school in Kosovo. My mother-in-law was in a Serbian school in Pristina in the first grade.

Ali Podrimja didn’t go, he went to Besim Bokshi, his professor, and told him he wants to go to Albania and he said, “Yes, but these poems you’re writing here...” Because he would take some poems he wrote to his professor to check them out, if they’re good or not, “You can’t write these poems there.” And my brother went to Albania alone and met my father after three months. *Ehee* {onomatopoeia}. My father, my father had authority there, he was best friends with Aleks Buda.¹⁸ In Aleks Buda’s book, Aleks Buda writes how he visited him. I had five New Year’s cards that Aleks Buda sent to Shaban Ferri as the President of the Academy of Sciences, in a small box {shows the size with his hands}. But you, you lost them [addresses Jakup] (laughs).

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Could you tell us more about your father now that you’re talking about your brother, how much information did you have about him and what kind of life did he have there?

¹⁷ Ali Podrimja (1942 – 2012) was an Albanian poet. He was born in Gjakova, Kosovo. In the early ‘80s, he published the masterful collection *Lum Lumi* (1982), which marked a turning point not only in his own work but also in contemporary Kosovo verse as a whole.

¹⁸ Aleks Buda (1910-1993) was an Albanian historian. After completion of his education in Italy and Austria, he returned to Albania. Although his education was in literature, he made a career as a historian during the socialist period in Albania. He was a member and president of the Academy of Sciences of Albania.

Rexhep Ferri: We knew he was alive... He went there in 1944, me and my mother accompanied until he left the city, he had a gray coat, a fedora {puts his hand to his head}, there was a lot of wind, he didn't button up his coat {touches his chest}, he had a bag on his shoulder {touches his shoulder}, and said, "Go." {moves his hand forward} Back then, he didn't wave, because women back then were a bit more, they weren't like today, back then women didn't go to coffee shops alone, now they do that, it's good, I like it.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So was more reserved.

Rexhep Ferri: Yes, this was in '44. We found out he was alive in 1955.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: *Uaaa* {onomatopoeia}.

Rexhep Ferri: After eleven years, we found out that our father is alive.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How, how, where did the news come from, what was the source?

Rexhep Ferri: Ah, the border between Tropoja and Gjakova is 20 kilometers. My mother was in Gjakova, my grandmother was in Tropoja. After ten or fifteen years, my mother found out her mother died. That's how wild the border was, not wild.... It doesn't seem real. I thought of Edith Durham¹⁹ now, when she heard in Shkodra, when she traveled for the first time to Albania she heard the song about the Kosovo woman who had killed, because it was a family from Kosovo, her husband and her two sons, because her husband killed, no handed over her two brothers, you know that song?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes, yes.

Rexhep Ferri: Yes, when she heard, "When I stabbed my husband, I felt like my brothers have risen from the dead, but when I stabbed my son, I felt as if I plucked out my own eyes" and when Edith Durham heard it she said, "Is it true or fictional?" "No," they said, "it's true, it happened in Shkodra. We will take you to see the house where it happened." So these realities of the border that I'm talking about, people can't perceive them as truths, but as fiction, as if it's a novel, fantasy, that's how harsh that border was. But even with all those difficulties, all that poverty of that time, people had more personality than they do now. People were closer to one another than they are now, and they were more generous than they are now. They shared good and bad together and all of these difficult times had a way out, hope kept them alive.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you get the news that your father is alive, who told you?

¹⁹ Mary Edith Durham (1863-1944) was a British traveler, artist, and writer who became famous for her anthropological writings about life in Albanian lands in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Rexhep Ferri: My [maternal] uncle sent us a picture of my father, we still have it.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Through whom?

Rexhep Ferri: Huh?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Through whom, from whom did it come, was there any communication?

Rexhep Ferri: That uncle, we didn't share a last name, so he wrote to my mother, "There, I sent you a picture of Shaban." He didn't say your husband, but he said in a way a photograph of your father, or brother, or so on. But we received and we recognized our father.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: So it was possible to send letters?

Rexhep Ferri: Yes, but it would take six months for a letter to arrive. And my brother, my brother didn't suffer in Albania thanks to my father, because my father was a diplomat, he knew what kind of regime he was living in and how he should preserve his personality. To be content with what he had at the moment. We received an education in Gjakova, my mother suffered a lot for my brother who went to Albania because he was young.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were you surprised by his decision to go to Albania, or was it...

Rexhep Ferri: Of course we were surprised. And he, "In that instant," he said, "when the soldier came to get me," because he left on his own, he said, "I regretted it."

Erëmirë Krasniqi: An albanian soldier?

Rexhep Ferri: He said, "He was worse than Serbian soldiers." "Huh, you came to die, lock him in, *ding*." {pretends to throw something forcefully} Instead of asking if he wants water or something, no, just {moves his hand}. So, we went to school.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In Gjakova?

Rexhep Ferri: In Gjakova, yes. I, in the beginning, there were books and literature. I'm not saying, because Naim Frashëri²⁰ is like a father of romanticism for Albanians, but I liked Mjeda²¹ more.

²⁰ Naim Frashëri was an Albanian poet and writer (1846-1990) He was one of the most prominent figures of the *Rilindja Kombëtare* (National Awakening), the nineteenth century Albanian national movement, together with his two brothers Sami and Abdyl. He is widely regarded as the national poet of Albania.

²¹ Ndre Mjeda (1866-1937) was an Albanian philologist, poet, priest, *Rilindas*, translator and writer of the Albanian Renaissance.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Mjeda.

Rexhep Ferri: Mjeda's poetry inspired me to start writing.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What would you write, and did you start writing at an early age?

Rexhep Ferri: Yes, it was in elementary school.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Would you just reflect or were they also...

Rexhep Ferri: And it's strange that I loved books more than I read books.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Just as objects (laughs).

Rexhep Ferri: I mentioned a weakness of mine. Lis, my grandchild that I mentioned, reads more than I did at his age. But back then it was a hard time. When I went to school in Peja, there was only one book at the bookstore in Gjakova, *Tufa* by Latif Berisha, there were no books in Albanian. 99 percent of people in Gjakova were Albanian, the library was full of books in Serbian, only one book {holds on finger up} in Albanian, {shows the thickness of the book with his finger} a 30-page booklet. When I went to high school in Peja, but I'll tell you about Peja later. A professor of mine sees my drawings, not my art professor, but another professor who had studied in Italy. He didn't finish school because war had started. But, he had seen the world a little, "You should go to *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit*."²² {shrugs} *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit*, that was the first time I heard of *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit*. Then I started hanging out with other students who were better at drawing, in other classrooms, drawing together and so on... I went to Peja and took the entrance exam.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you decide, did your family support you?

Rexhep Ferri: My mother, my mother, yes. With my mother and no money. I entered the exam, I got accepted, and there was boarding offered. I started very early to try and make money for myself, and it was very easy to design the signages of different companies {raises his hand as if he's writing} barbershops, different shops... I would design those, and I would earn a little money to live, to pay. My mother would send me some. Qumil Xuna, our neighbor, got my mother a job in Gjakova, in the tobacco factory, folding. And we made it somehow, I finished high school thinking it would end there and I would go to Skivjan. Skivjan is a village in the direction of Peja, before you get to Gjakova, about three or five kilometers before you enter Gjakova. I thought I would buy a bicycle and I will teach in that school, because in Gjakova they would hire their own people. That was all I could dream of...

²² *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit*, the Arts High School in Peja was built in 1926 and opened in 1949. The first generations of visual artists in Kosovo received their education in figurative and applicative arts from this institution. This education enabled the artists to continue higher education in arts. The historical building of the Art High School in Peja was destroyed in August, 2017.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Within the realm of possible.

Rexhep Ferri: It was more likely to happen and that was the future of my life.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Let's stick with the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit*, can you tell us more about the school environment, since it was an institution...

Rexhep Ferri: Look, I'm not saying that the professors wanted us, they were all Serbians.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was it in both Albanian and Serbian or how?

Rexhep Ferri: No, no, it was in Serbian.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Ah, okay.

Rexhep Ferri: It was in Serbian. All the professors were Serbian, and some of those professors were children of chetniks.²³ But forming a personality doesn't let you embarrass yourself, I don't remember a professor at the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit*, there were a lot of Serbians there because Gjakova, Peja was full of Montenegrins then. So half of them were Montenegrins and some Albanians, there was only one Albanian girl. They did not look at us condescendingly, they looked at us the same, none of the professors, not even in Belgrade {points behind him}. Except one person bothered me once, it doesn't matter. It was a good school, after school, this is how poverty affects you. I couldn't even dream that I could study because Belgrade was very far away back then.

When I say far, I was, I started working as a teacher in Pozheran, Pozheran is near Ferizaj {points left} and on New Year's Eve, in the morning, on December 21, at 8:00 I went to wait for the bus to go to Ferizaj, to go to Gjakova for New Year's Eve and I ended up in Prizren, I couldn't get to Gjakova. That's why I said Belgrade was very far then. And when I got to Prizren at 7:00, 8:00 in the evening there was nothing I could do. The hotel was prepared for New Year's Eve, the tickets were sold out and so on. At the fountain, there was a two-story coffee shop, on the second floor, there were three small rooms for like *fakira*,²⁴ like for poor people. I took a room there to sleep, I got down, I ate, I didn't smoke, but I had taken a book with me, I always had books with me, I didn't read them properly, often {pretend to flip through the pages} I would not read some pages.

²³ 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.

²⁴ Turk.: *fakira*, poor man.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What happened?

Rexhep Ferri: When the book was too thick, I couldn't finish it. So, I told this as a story to show how far and how unreachable it was for my imagination to go study in Belgrade. But there was a time in the '50s, '55, '58 when they were firing professors, "No, you're not fit to educate the youth, you're unsuited..."

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Ideologically unsuited.

Rexhep Ferri: Yes, yes. Back then, I was friends with an Albanian language professor, Kadri Kusari, he passed away 20-30 years ago, he died 30 years ago, he was in prison for ten years... and he said to me, "Rexhep, leave Kosovo as soon as possible or you will go to prison."

Erëmirë Krasniqi: As a family persecuted by the government.

Rexhep Ferri: Yes. "But, how?" "You'll find a way, you'll find a way." When he finished school there, he was familiar with Belgrade. When I left for the entrance exam in Belgrade, my [maternal] aunt, Nasibe, accompanied me to the bus station, because my mother, the first time {raises his finger} my mother was in the hospital. And when she said, because before I left, a day before or so, I went to see her in the hospital. When I told her I'm going, she told me where the money was, "Take this money." I took half of it, and left the other half. Nasibe, my aunt accompanied me, she brought me a towel and Kadri Kusari {pretends to take off his hand watch}, he took his hand watch off and gave it to me. He was the reason I went, "Leave!" But back then, there was a lot of trust in friendships. I trusted him as if he were my father or my big brother and I listened to his advice. I listened to his advice twice, when I went to study and when I left before the flag in '64.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: '64.

Rexhep Ferri: Then I...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Wasn't it in '68?

Rexhep Ferri: What?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: In '68, I know, but...

Rexhep Ferri: No, no, for the flag in '68 Adem Demaçi²⁵ put 120 people in prison.

²⁵ Adem Demaçi (1936-2018) was an Albanian writer and politician and longtime political prisoner who spent a total of 27 years in prison for his nationalist beliefs and political activities. In 1998 he became the head of the political wing of the Kosovo Liberation Army, from which he resigned in 1999.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes, yes I know.

Rexhep Ferri: They sew the flags in Turkey, they sew ten in Turkey and God knows where they sewed the rest, but anyway, let's not get into this because politics are dangerous. And in Belgrade...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What did he tell you in '64, what kind advice did he give you?

Rexhep Ferri: Well I came for vacation from Belgrade, in Kosovo started, in cities of Kosovo there were organizations about...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Unification of Lands...

Rexhep Ferri: For sewing and distributing flags.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: (laughs)

Rexhep Ferri: And in Gjakova, there was, I think Kadri Kusari was the lead in Gjakova. When he saw me...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: The professor, was he also involved in this action?

Rexhep Ferri: Huh?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: The professor or friend, was he also involved in this action?

Rexhep Ferri: Yes, he was the lead in Gjakova. "What the hell," he said, "brought you here?" I said, "The vacation, Kadri." "You," he said, "leave tomorrow. I don't wanna see you here tomorrow." I brought some clothes to my mother for washing, she washed them, they were wet, I took the wet clothes and left. So he saved my life twice, but he didn't save himself. I didn't have an older brother but I consider him as one, and I grew up without a father but I never... My mother was so strong that I never felt the absence of my father, because I knew he was alive.

Part Three

Rexhep Ferri: In Belgrade, the professors were very humane and very professional and they didn't differentiate based on where you're from, are you Serbian, or Croat, or Slovenian, or Albanian or whatever. What they felt inside I don't know, but we didn't notice anything. Actually, I'll tell you a story that Serbia and Serbs today are not like they used to be. In my second year, my classmates tell me,

“Ferri, take our *indeks*²⁶ to Doctor Pavlo Vasić to sign them.” Because Serbs from Belgrade were more spoiled, “When he sees you, he won’t get mad and he will sign them.” How would I go, I was never in the professors’ room. I knocked on the door. He was old, he was a doctor of art poetics, he studied Art History at the Academy of Arts in Paris. His glasses had slipped down {touches his glasses} and he said, “Come on in, Ferri, why are you entering in such a shy manner?” He was writing something on the table. “You’re older than Greeks in the Balkans.”

Erëmirë Krasniqi: As an Albanian, right?

Rexhep Ferri: Back then, this opinion of his was not in my top list where I have it now, but I never forgot it, and he signed them. There is no Serb today that would say what Doctor Pavlo Vasić said then, that you’re older than Greeks in the Balkans. We were lucky to have such professors.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell me a little about the background of these professors, because I know that many of them were educated in big European cities and then they taught in Belgrade? What was that experience of being educated from an academic staff like that? How different was that educational experience from the one you had here? Can you tell us about the transition you had from here to going to a place like Belgrade and getting exposed to such advanced ideas?

Rexhep Ferri: Of course, most of the Serbian people weren’t as educated, there was only the elite of the pre-war aristocrats who educated their children. So, my classmates, we were the same, but the difference between the professors we had in Belgrade and the ones in Paris was very small. Because I also was at the *Académie des Beaux Arts* as an assistant later, and I saw what the professors were like there and what my professors were like in Belgrade, because they were educated [there]. Emancipation does its thing, education does its thing, trusting the *rreth*²⁷ where you live and the energy among the people you communicate with has an impact. If you sit next to a fire with a big flame, there’s more red light on your face rather than dim light.

So, it was a time which I think was golden and, of course, when I finished it in ‘66, ‘67, I had forgotten about Skivjan, that I would become a teacher in Skivjan, I didn’t even think about Pristina, I wanted to go to Paris. And my mother, who also was from a big family with tragedies, her father was also killed, also from my father’s side [of the family], I had a lot of respect, not only because she was my mother, but I had respect for her life. She didn’t know if her husband was alive or not for eleven years. She never said how could my husband leave me on the streets with children. Never! We all have mothers, you have mothers too, but there are mothers who have suffered a lot. I wrote something recently about a mother whose four sons were killed. Did they know why they were getting killed? For this day?

²⁶ *Indeks* were personal booklets issued to students under the old university system. It was used both as a student ID and grade register.

²⁷ *Rreth* (circle) is the social circle, it includes not only the family but also the people with whom an individual is in contact. The opinion of the *rreth* is crucial in defining one’s reputation.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Mister Ferri, can we go back to Belgrade for...

Rexhep Ferri: Belgrade, regardless of the rapports, how much Albanians suffered from the friendship and enmity with Serbs, for me, for those of us who studied in Belgrade, Belgrade was the city of our youth and I have many memories from Belgrade, because I was in the circle of poets, writers, of people who were emancipated and cultured. And they had creative personalities and most of them were older than me. I also hung out with my professor and I learned from them, and I always wanted to be friends with people who knew more than me. Not to steal from them, but to listen to something I haven't before and not miss out on something that is valuable for life, and learn when it's possible.

When life allows you, I mean, take the opportunity to learn when you can. In creativity everything starts from rags. Vasko Popa,²⁸ he was a great poet, he has a poem, "Bring back my rags." And I learned a lot from those people who knew more than I did. I feel sorry that I came so late and was not able to realize my potential as I would have wished to.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Why do you have this feeling?

Rexhep Ferri: Huh?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Why do you feel you're late?

Rexhep Ferri: Well, you know why? I see that in my compositions I've written poems during the '60s. During the '70s, I started to write prose, in the '80s, I also published novels. During the '90s, 2000, 2010, I started writing essays. I had works with which I could open many exhibitions but I didn't. When the demonstrations started, I had an exhibition scheduled in Paris. The demonstrations started, and I couldn't open the second exhibition in Paris. So, in a way I was just a second late, but for a second, I didn't get the gold medal, someone else took it.

This is not not jealousy, it's a regret why I didn't make more of myself, because I could have done more, I had self-confidence. I got rid of my jealousy when I talked to the gallerist in Paris in '77, when *Le Monde* newspaper wrote about it. In the *Le Monde*, and the gallerist took me across the street to drink a coffee, because he was looking after his own interests. It was a three steps walk, and during those three steps he said, "It's a shame you're not Spanish." He mainly felt sorry for himself, because he could have sold the paintings more expensively and faster [if I were Spanish]. "But you're Albanian, an unknown nation."

²⁸ Vasile "Vasko" Popa (1922-1991) was a Serbian poet of Romanian origin. Popa wrote in a modernist style that referred more to Serbian surrealism and popular traditions.

Back then, Kadare's book *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur* [The General of the Dead Army] had just come out in French and, in the exhibit Alain Bosquet²⁹ has opened for me, he was the first to write about Ismail Kadare³⁰ because they were very good friends. And that statement, that it's too bad I'm not Spanish, the Spanish weren't going to hinder me. At that time, Picasso, Salvador Dali, Miró were alive in Paris, hundreds and hundreds of world-known artists, museums all over the world were filled with their paintings. But what would bother me was an X, Y in Pristina, or an X, Y in Tirana, and that gallerist, because this happened many years ago...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: 40...

Rexhep Ferri: No, 50 years or more, 50 years, in '77.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: 40, 43 no, more. (laughs)

Rexhep Ferri: He helped me a lot with a word that I didn't even reply to, he didn't say a thing, we drank coffee together and, from that day on, maybe not exactly that day, but gradually, I buried my jealousy, egoistic jealousy. Not jealousy, but if I see that you're ahead of me and I ask Rexhep Ferri to work two, three hours more than I already have in order to get ahead of you. Just like in competitions, you run three hours a day for a second, I have to run four hours a day to pass you. This is not jealousy.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Constructive, constructive jealousy.

Rexhep Ferri: Yes.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: It helps you develop further.

Rexhep Ferri: It's very constructive and very human. That's why Belgrade and Paris helped me. When I first went to Paris, Paris was still a city of art. Culture after the '80s, since 1980 and on, or even now, it has started to not be very research-based, because people now don't have time for something very thorough. If life had one hundred flavors, today it has one thousand flavors. People are trying in every way, from moral to immoral, they use everything trying to get famous, to materialize their life. It's not about fulfilling life anymore, it's about materializing it. This division happened in the 20th century, my son tells me, "Why are you so dramatic with your art and so on," but my life is very dramatic.

The first year of studies in Belgrade, in the sculpture class, our professor assigned us to sculpt portraits of each-other, and a Macedonian sculpted my portrait, the professor looked at it and said, "*Prava rimsak glava*," a real Roman head, rough. Roman soldiers were very disciplined, life made them rough.

²⁹ Alain Bosquet, born Anatolij Bisk (1919 – 1998), was a French poet.

³⁰ Ismail Kadare (1936) is an Albanian novelist, poet, essayist, screenwriter, and playwright. He is a leading international literary figure and intellectual. He focused on poetry until the publication of his first novel, *The General of the Dead Army*, which made him famous internationally.

I don't have it here to show you. That portrait there {points right} is big but it's in a book page, there. Albanians' portraits aren't soft {touches his face}, they seem like they're cut with an ax, engraved *rram, rram, bam, bam* {onomatopoeia} and the tougher life gets, spiritually as well [becomes], not only tougher, but also more powerful, because you want to resist, it's with untamed blood. The friend who helped open an exhibition in Paris, he was a friend of...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Kadare?

Rexhep Ferri: Kadare, the last time I met him in Paris, in his house, he told me about a friend of his from Croatia, about [Miroslav] Krleža,³¹ that he will publish a book. He said, "Krleža's masterpiece will be published in French, all the others have been published, but the masterpiece." It was more voluminous. He said, "I'm scared that the French people will not receive it well, even though he is the greatest writer in the Balkans."

Erëmirë Krasniqi: He was also very important for art in that moment when art parted ways from realism and....

Rexhep Ferri: Yes, yes, it was him.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: He made the main discussion.

Rexhep Ferri: Him and Tito. Krleža was the only person who said to Tito, "You"[singular], not, "You"[plural] and Tito listened to him and... "He's the greatest writer," he said, "but, it's a little tough for us French, because our blood has tamed." Our blood was still untamed. My son has a tamed blood, your generation because thankfully you have these opportunities, if only we can survive these people who made Kosovo a mess. So, my art until five or eight years ago was more dramatic and it had less, I can't say less color, but all the colors were hidden inside a color, two colors, three colors because there was pain in everything.

Part Four

Rexhep Ferri: The Demonstrations were brought here. But even us as professors helped because my generation had an urge to go to war with Serbs, to go to war with a strong enemy. We were aware of how many wars we had lost, and our students, being given a freedom in Kosovo to open schools to develop culturally. We were connected, if we talk about visual arts only, we were connected to Belgrade, because the professors at the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* were from Belgrade, most of them. And

³¹ Miroslav Krleža was a Croatian writer and a prominent figure in the cultural life of the two Yugoslav states, the Kingdom and the Socialist Republic.

we, they finished school, they finished school, they were children of aristocrats who had finished school in Paris too. So it wasn't very hard to go from a province to a capital city, because for us in the Balkans at the time, the only one [city] that we didn't know but it was like a European capital city [to us], was Belgrade, and Zagreb as well.

Maybe it was difficult, but it wasn't that difficult to adapt. We were more poor than others, but that wasn't noticeable in the friendships because there is a lot of solidarity among young people. So, I never felt [like I was] of another nationality among people with other nationalities, but we were all together as if we grew up in the same neighborhood. I have studied and specialized for eight years in Belgrade, because the Academy [of Art] lasted five years, a semester to get the diploma, then the second degree lasted two years and a semester to get the diploma, so it was seven, eight years in total. So, during those eight years, no one has said even one bad word to me in a national sense, no one offended me in a national sense. Maybe because it was the time of those professors and colleagues of mine, my classmates who weren't biased because even school after [the Second World] War in Yugoslavia was oriented towards Europeanization, not towards churches and Byzantium. So, we felt the same, like me, like them, we dreamed of Paris.

I remember once when the son of the housekeeper of the Academy, because the Academy had its own housekeeper, their apartment [was] next to the Academy, they would clean, there was a café there, and their son once went, he was a driver for some French embassy, he went to Paris and we all gathered to listen to his stories of Paris. Who were we asking, a driver who didn't know, with high school education, I don't know what kind of school he finished.

But I remember something he said that turned out to be true, he said, "Everybody works in Paris, not in their profession, they work something else. Someone who studied geography, works as a gatekeeper." I don't know if you understand me. He is, he was a driver, he cleaned the streets, and so on. So, no one does their job. This was what he had seen, he also went and visited the Louvre [Museum] so he could tell us about it. But now, since I'm talking about the Louvre, we all dreamed about it. I couldn't go there during my studies for two reasons: I didn't have a passport and I studied for eight years without a scholarship, since my family was not on the partisan side for reasons connected to our family's history.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was this one of the reasons you didn't have a passport?

Rexhep Ferri: Huh?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Was this also one of the reasons you didn't have a passport?

Rexhep Ferri: Yes, I was registered in Albania, because I was born in Albania. So, my mother and I were Albanian citizens. So, then when I, I'll talk about Belgrade. In the beginning, in Belgrade, it was a little

hard for me to adapt. There was a professor who helped me in the beginning, who was a professor in Peja and he went to Belgrade.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Which one was it?

Rexhep Ferri: Miša Đorđević. And he started working at Television Belgrade, back then there weren't, Television needed commercials and all commercials were done by hand, they were drawn. From letters to every other visual message, and Miša would take me with him to help, to make the signs, to enlarge the sketches, to make his sketches and so on. So, I started doing what I did with the store signage in Peja. I started to work in Belgrade in a quite difficult job, but I sacrificed my free time to make a living.

I have always been modest, I did not pursue luxurious things, I would get enough money to pay for the dorm or a small apartment. I remember I had a room once, I had for two, three or four years. It was two by three meters and it was the room of my youth, the best room of my life (smiles). That's how big Jakup's room is, but he left the room now, now he has the entire floor upstairs. In Belgrade, since I was a fan of literature and I spoke Serbian, I started to read but not write.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did you learn Serbian? If you could include that.

Rexhep Ferri: High school was in Serbian, five years.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you have any problems at first?

Rexhep Ferri: Well, I had to learn it. There I started reading the great world writers, we didn't know them here and we didn't have them. I have, it was a huge difference, but youngsters learn fast, faster than maybe, I don't know if hearing or sight is faster, but I think sight. The youngster's sight catches things maybe much faster than [their] hearing can. I saw Beckett's plays in Belgrade, in Pristina they were still showing *Kryet e hudre*s [Garlic's head], a drama, useless words, or the one by Kristo Floqi,³² *Kushërini nga Amerika* [The cousin from America], how a cousin came from America and they all went to look at what he brought home. So, but Kosovo started very quickly, every time I came home from my studies I saw a...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Development?

Rexhep Ferri: A development. For example, in Pristina it happened to me, I was friends with writers, I went to a coffee shop, that was Army's coffee shop next to the Grand [Hotel], at the house that...

Kaltrina Krasniqi: Kino Armata?

³² Kristo Floqi (1976-1951) was an Albanian patriot, playwright, politician and lawyer.

Rexhep Ferri: At Armata, there was a coffee shop and they didn't let me in, they didn't let me in, I was with two journalists from *Rilindja*,³³ they didn't let me in because I had long hair (laughs). It became a huge deal. The next day, the officer comes to apologize and so on. It was (laughs) humorous, you know. So everything arrived [in Kosovo] quickly, the wind brought things faster than people think. And apart from following international art...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What kind of exhibitions would be on display there? Can you...

Rexhep Ferri: In Belgrade, before me, there was Henry Moore's exhibition in Belgrade. In 1951 was Henry Moore's exhibition in Belgrade. In Belgrade, I saw the exhibition of America's modern art, an American art collection. When pop art was trendy and for me seeing pop art was new, and there was a jacket of an American soldier of the Vietnam war and it had a pocket. A Belgrade citizen had the newspaper *Politika*³⁴ with him, and he put it in that pocket. But I would go to see exhibitions like that two or three times and, like you [addresses the interviewer], I always took a pen and notebook, I would take notes or something. When I went the next day, I saw *Politika* in its pocket...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Someone had intervened (laughs).

Rexhep Ferri: Someone had intervened. So, there were a few reactions from those who were under the umbrella of socialist realism, because they... But, Tito's politics separated art from socialist realism, it wasn't easy then. There were reactions, there are no restrictions in art but I concentrated more on painting then, not literature.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did you study painting or graphic arts?

Rexhep Ferri: No, no, painting. Not literature because the word is read and it could be misunderstood, a word could slip, and then it's read, understood, and it costs you politically if you have a question mark somewhere. But, even as a student, I started to present in exhibits, in Belgrade and out of it. No

³³ *Rilindja*, the first newspaper in the Albanian language in Yugoslavia, initially printed in 1945 as a weekly newspaper.

³⁴ *Politika* is a daily newspaper published in Belgrade, Serbia since 1904.

only me, but to be honest before there were other students there, Muslim Mulliqi,³⁵ Gjelosh Gjokaj,³⁶ Matej Rodiqi,³⁷ Shemsedin Kasapolli.³⁸

Erëmirë Krasniqi: He taught at the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* then.

Rexhep Ferri: Yes, he was my professor in Peja. These were the first generation of Albanians who studied, and some others that I can't remember, there were a couple more. We are the second generation, me, Tahir Emra,³⁹ [Xhevdet Xhafa](#), Daut Berisha,⁴⁰ [Fatmir Krypa](#), and many others. Until we had the means to open one in Pristina. The first building of the University of Prishtina was *Shkolla e Lartë Pedagogjike*,⁴¹ and there was the section of arts and thanks to Muslim Mulliqi, it was a great arts school. And there were still students who came from the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* in Peja with good figurative culture, during the time I was there as a professor, I got to the point where I would rather accept someone who finished the gymnasium⁴² rather than the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit*. The *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* had gone from one end to the other. Maybe it isn't the professors' or students' fault, but of those who make the standards for how to profile a school. They made it like a craft school. I don't know how far it got, but at that time, I noticed that it was too far gone and I didn't know where it would end up.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can you tell us more about *Shkolla e Lartë*? How was it established?

³⁵ Muslim Mulliqi (1934-1998) was an impressionist and expressionist painter from Kosovo. Born into a family of artists, Mulliqi attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade under Zoran Petrović's mentorship, where he also continued with his postgraduate studies.

³⁶ Gjelosh Gjokaj (1933-2016) was an Albanian painter and graphic artist. He was born in the village of Miles in Tuzi, Yugoslavia. After receiving his fine art degree from the Art Academy in Belgrade in 1963 he started teaching in Pristina, Kosovo until 1969.

³⁷ Matej Rodiqi was born in 1929 in Prizren, Kosovo. He graduated from the Academy of Applied Arts in Belgrade. He specialized in industrial design at the Venice State Institute. He is a well-known Kosovo artist, especially known for his large-scale tapestries that cover one of the interior walls of the Grand Hotel in Pristina, Kosovo.

³⁸ Shemsedin Kasapolli (1929-2006) was born in Peja, Kosovo. He studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade, Serbia. Upon his return to Kosovo in 1969 he taught aesthetics at the *Shkolla e Lartë Pedagogjike* and later at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prishtina.

³⁹ Tahir Emra (1938) attended the School of Arts of Peja. In 1966 he graduated from the Academy of Figurative Arts of Belgrade. He was a founding member of the Academy of Figurative Arts of Kosovo in 1974. He is considered one of the proponents of contemporary art in Kosovo in the 1960s.

⁴⁰ Daut Berisha (1941) was born in Peja, Kosovo. He graduated from the Academy of Applied Arts in Belgrade, in the class of Professor Rajko Nikolic. He received a master's degree from the Academy of Fine Arts in Paris, France.

⁴¹ *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.

⁴² A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

Rexhep Ferri: But, if it weren't for that school, because the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* was opened in 1949, I studied there in '54, the fifth generation. If that school was not on the level it was, with those professors, none of us, starting from Muslim Mullqi to me, we wouldn't be who we are.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You couldn't even have continued your education further, since that...

Rexhep Ferri: We would have gone somewhere else, physics or chemistry, something would've happened. And I'm very grateful to the professors who had that culture and weren't egoistical about keeping the knowledge for themselves, but they loved us like themselves, even though most of them were Serbs and Montenegrins, they loved us Albanians the same. During my studies, because I did my figurative studies in Peja, I started learning there and never stopped. I am still a student, I am still learning. Up to the point that I am strong and capable of opening a book or a new catalog to see how someone young is painting, what they're painting, so I'm still some kind of a student that is learning something. And I would want there to be more provocations from the new generation because I would feel young also. But the new generation, I don't know how to explain the new generation.

While I was in Belgrade, I would take a magazine by the American Embassy *Pregled* [Review], it was published in Serbo-Croatian once a month, it was about culture, and there was an interview with an American painter, a young painter who textually said, "Picasso created 50 masterpieces within 60 or 70 years, or 30 masterpieces, but I'm thinking of to create 30 masterpieces in three years." Look, I don't know if this would work, with what kind of machine can you do that, you can't go to the Moon or anywhere else in three years to make 30 masterpieces, and he was serious, he was in the younger generation.

And I feel like something similar exists in today's generation. Maybe, maybe because you have figured life out much quicker, as something amazing, with one thousand flavors and that passes by fast, and since it's like that you have to take advantage of it in every way, in every pore. I don't know, we were a generation who was devoted to our profession, without the spirit of materialism, without the spirit of treachery, but we believed in what we worked for, but a person believes in their work if they believe in themselves. If you don't believe in yourself, you can't believe in your work. This was the generation that I would not want this myth to be over with us.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When did you come back from Belgrade?

Rexhep Ferri: Excuse me?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When did you come back from Belgrade? In which year?

Rexhep Ferri: I came back, I came back from Belgrade after Paris in '67, in 1967, I finished the Academy, I went to Paris, I came back from Paris to Pristina, I worked at *Rilindja* as an arts editor for

two years. I would also be part of exhibits in Belgrade because I was accepted into the Association of Figurative Artists of Yugoslavia. Not just me, others too, Muslim and others who were here. Then, I started my third-level education in Belgrade, those two years while working at *Rilindja* I was still undecided, do I stay in Pristina or go to Paris, and I found a medium and went back to Belgrade, but during those two years, I wasn't a citizen of Belgrade. I went there for a day or two, but I wasn't there all the time.

A very big change happened in Belgrade, a big change happened in Belgrade and I saw that the behaviors aren't the same as those of my friends, for example, women were more thoughtful, they always brought us something. Actually, one of the years we had such a great time. The wife of one of the ambassadors of Iraq or Iran, I don't know, one of these countries, they would bring her with a car. That was the first car that stopped in front of the Academy and she would bring us a jar or jam or something. We would go to the bakery there and would buy bread and she would take care of breakfast. So...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did that behavior change?

Rexhep Ferri: And... I'll illustrate a change. There was a girl from Belgrade, a classmate, we called her Pegi, because she had freckles (laughs) and, "Come on," she would say, "Ferri, let's go drink some hot *raki*⁴³ at the bar." And before we got in, she would give me the money because she wanted to show them that she is going in with a gentleman, not with a person who doesn't have money, and she wouldn't go in alone. She wanted to go, but she didn't want to go alone. After two years, within two years, a change happened, I can't call it emancipation because it wasn't, it's something beyond emancipation. What's beyond emancipation? Maybe a full stop and a dash and a full stop again.

I found an academy where anyone could go in, anyone could go out. It wasn't the same dedication as before. It wasn't the same dedication because this was said to me by my professor when I went for my third-level studies, "Do you think it's them?" After I finished my studies, I met him because I became a professor here, "How is it going with your students?" He asked me. He said, "Do you think that my students are like you used to be? Things have changed."

So, it's good if things change for good, but it's twice as bad for those nations who have taken the step of forming a national identity late, cultural uplift, cultural representation. Because there are people who have put their history into a drawer and into museums, and we needed to say that we have finished school, we needed to present ourselves.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did these fast steps affect you?

⁴³ *Raki* is a very common alcoholic drink made from distillation of fermented fruit.

Rexhep Ferri: They arrived here slower and at that time, to be honest, not with a critical intention, but Kosovo was known in the Yugoslav art space, in Yugoslavia, which had 22 million up to Ljubljana and in the exhibitions in the world where Yugoslavia would present, visual art was the only popular art in Yugoslavia, more than literature, music, film...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: They started late.

Rexhep Ferri: Late, even though even in these fields there were some good works. In music, there was Rexho Mulliqi,⁴⁴ Nexhmije Pagarusha's⁴⁵ husband, he popularized Nexhmije Pagarusha, he was a genius, an unfortunate composer who didn't fully realize his potential as much as he could have, but he was a genius. There was Muharrem Qena⁴⁶ for drama. His *Erveheja* that got all the prizes in Belgrade. This started too, not only visual arts, but also...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Dramatic arts.

Rexhep Ferri: I was in a concert in Belgrade when Nexhmije, I was a student, the hall was full of people. I went because we were friends, but also, how blood works, it's strange, it's also something good. I also went because she was Albanian, I was proud of her. Seeing Bekim Fehmiu⁴⁷ in a theater play, Albanians from Kosovo and Albanians in general owe a lot to Bekim Fehmiu. We owe him because with our professionalism and our ego, I'm not helping him because I want to do it, we don't have him in any of our movies, in any sentence in Albanian movies, Bekim Fehmiu isn't present, it's our fault even though he wasn't a calculating person, he didn't give up. But people who are devoted to their personality, they don't give up, they don't beg, they don't beg for anything. You have to talk to them nicely like mothers talk to their children, and so it's a big lack.

I remember an exhibit of mine in Belgrade, since we're talking about Bekim Fehmiu, in one of my exhibits in Belgrade, I went to the opening and when I went to the opening the next day Ali Shkuriiu⁴⁸ passes by and sees it, because it was in *Palace Albania*, there was the Cultural Center Gallery and the advertisement was outside. A high political official came in, I'm not mentioning his name because it's not worth it, and he asked why I didn't send him an invitation to the opening. I apologized because I came by train and didn't know where they sent the invitations. They were used to other painters that sent them [invitations], but I didn't have those close relations with them, but we weren't on bad terms either. Bekim was also there, we were hanging out with Bekim.

⁴⁴ Rexho Mulliqi (1923-1982) was an important Albanian composer from Kosovo, responsible for Kosovo's earliest classical orchestral and choral pieces. He was also an educator and a longstanding producer of Radio Pristina's music programming.

⁴⁵ Nexhmije Pagarusha (1933-2020) is one of Kosovo's first classically trained singers. Her repertoire covers classical Albanian music and folk songs. She is known as the "Nightingale of Kosovo."

⁴⁶ Muharrem Qena (1930-2006) was a renowned playwright, director and singer from Mitrovica based in Pristina.

⁴⁷ Bekim Fehmiu (1936 – 2010) was an Albanian theater and film actor. He was the first Eastern European actor to star in Hollywood during the Cold War.

⁴⁸ Ali Shukrija (1919-2005) held important positions in the Yugoslav state.

The next day, he invited us to his house to drink whiskey with him. Bekim apologized, he said, “I apologize but...” Bekim didn’t like him either, I don’t want to mention his name because there were only two other people, I can’t say that they have done any dirty national work, they made some kind national ploys, for the other, but two of them, one of them was this one. Bekim apologized and said, “I’m going to go to Italy,” he was playing Odysseus, Ulysses. He went home and he said, “Come on,” he said, “Rexhep, don’t bother with him,” (smiles) he said, “Bekim will buy you a whiskey. Now we will drink whiskey, we don’t need to go to his house.” It was true, and this is how it ended.

Most of the people who were in high functions tried, it was a very difficult time, they tried to protect their people, Albanians, they tried to protect their personality also. I don’t want to mention names, but there were two, three, people whose ego to build a career made them more Catholic than the Pope.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were there political interferences in art? You mentioned it a little in literature.

Rexhep Ferri: There weren’t any in painting, in music, because music is abstract by nature. But there was in literature. Those who studied Albanology and literature, their parents would say, “Do you want to study the school of prison?”⁴⁹ So this is how it was at that time.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: They would scan everything that was produced, published? I mean were there specialist people who read if there’s any subtext? What happened?

Rexhep Ferri: Look, knowledgeable people, those who know, don’t make mistakes. I had a worker while I was building my house and the workman said to him, “O, Halim, like a dynamite,” he was opening the foundation with a jackhammer, *bam, bam* {moves his hands up and down}. I put this figure in my poetry, but they removed it.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How was it interpreted?

Rexhep Ferri: Because knowledgeable people didn’t interpret it, but ignorant people did, “Rexhep is asking for the dynamite.” Just like Ilir Shaqiri’s⁵⁰ song about homeland, what does he ask about?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Oh, give me back what you owe me (laughs).

Rexhep Ferri: Give me back what you owe me or something like this. In Albania they said, “What do we owe him?”

⁴⁹ The Albanian language and literature university program in the past was perceived as nurturing nationalist sentiments among their students, in particular an aspiration to the separation of Kosovo from Yugoslavia. Students from this department often ended in prison. When the speaker says “school of prison,” he refers to that view commonly held.

⁵⁰ Ilir Shaqiri (1960) is a Kosovo folk singer and songwriter.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes. (laughs)

Rexhep Ferri: So, it was a time when... now, let's leave Belgrade behind, even though like all of us during our youth, the best part of our life, the best years, I was there, with all the difficulties that we had, all the difficulties a devoted student could have. We had to be devoted, it didn't work otherwise. Still those are the best years, as hard as they are {points to the interviewer}, these are your best years.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: (laughs)

Rexhep Ferri: In Pristina, when we just started to walk on our own feet and thanks to our communist leaders, not neo-communists because they're worse, we still have neo-communists in Tirana and Pristina, who swear on Lenin's, Stalin's and Enver Hoxha's⁵¹ head. But anyway, let's not talk about politics, we never got anything good out of it.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: But there was help from the socialist system to create cultural infrastructure, right?

Rexhep Ferri: But, but the need of our leaders to be equal to other republics of Yugoslavia helped Albanian culture. When you went to the offices in other centers, you would see their best painters, Serbs in Belgrade, Croats in Croatia, Slovenians in Slovenia, and there they also started to not take their son's, aunt's painting, but they would take... today, there's aren't any paintings by Muslim Mulliqi in any office. I'm taking Muslim as an example, they started to buy paintings, they starting to bring paintings for the Modern Art Museum, because all the republics had a Modern Art Museum, only we didn't.

Part Five

Rexhep Ferri: When I came back to Pristina, here I found Muslim [Mulliqi] and Gjelosh [Gjokaj], we came back Tahiri [Emra], I, Xhevdet Xhafa, Shemsedin [Kasapolli] came back from Belgrade, Mate, Fatmir Krypa and many others. Let's not select and make a long list now, but a generation which with a sacrificing devotion and with fully developed personality created their artistic path at that time, started and continued with seriousness. There was a [sort of] climate created here, a consciousness as well. People would come or they would buy books even if they didn't read, "Someone at home will read them." You can say to a person, "He's a snob," but snobs are are very useful to culture because they invest in culture, while investing in culture it will come back to them, in one of the three generations, it will come back to them, either with them, their child or their grandchild, or their great-grandchild, it comes back. Because they grow up with...

⁵¹ Enver Hoxha (1908-1985) was the leader of the Albanian Communist Party who ruled Albania as a dictator until his death.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Books...

Rexhep Ferri: They grow up with the radiance of what he brought home. So, back then we would have a lot of debates about culture, about art and...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What were they like? What kind of question did you talk about? What preoccupied you at that time?

Rexhep Ferri: Well, it was a detachment from the past, it was an *aksham*⁵² school. A song with only two notes, or with no notes at all. "I want to paint." Without investing anything in the painting, just, "I love painting," but I also want to have angel's wings and fly. Politics were created and, when I came back to Pristina to *Shkolla e Lartë*, politics started and Kosovo started to gain more independence and a detachment from Serbia. The Albanological Institute had closed, it opened for the second time, *Shkolla e Lartë* insisted for the university to be opened, and the University opened through a lot of devotion.

I remember what that generation did to open the University, without salaries, without... now they see everything through money. Of course politics also helped us then as well, those people who were, let's not mention them... People still think that everything that comes from Belgrade, everything that we learned there, we should forget. Here, who? We taught them, but they didn't have the courage to say that I learned from Rexhep Ferri, they said, "I established the University in the school of Pristina."

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did that Albanian state support help you at that time?

Rexhep Ferri: Excuse me?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: That political support that was leading Kosovo at that time, how did it help with the establishment of the University?

Rexhep Ferri: Look, thanks to the support of Tito. Tito at first didn't know if there was a Kosovo or what Kosovo was because he was surrounded by Serbian politics so he wouldn't understand. Very late when Serbian nationalism started to rise, when other republics also started to notice this and a silence began, a distrust, then Tito gave right to the republics. At the same time, he gave rights to us in Kosovo and the University and everything was opened.

I remember *Rilindja* used to be published once in two weeks, once in ten days, then it became daily, it was the only newspaper. Then the Television opened, the theater started, the Association of Writers started to present itself, we started to present ourselves. In all the exhibits that Yugoslavia would open

⁵² Turk.: *akşam*, night time. Education for those that did not have opportunities to receive an education in the early youth, so they went late in life and in the night time.

in the world, Kosovo was also present. There was that fund that the Ministry of Culture had then, I'm talkin about the '70s, for buying paintings for the fund of the Museum of Modern Art, and today those paintings are in the basement of the Gallery. It's been twenty, thirty years since the liberation, only if they bought any paintings by their friends, because I want my presentation to be there.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Mostly there wasn't a budget, support for artists.

Rexhep Ferri: But back then, there was a budget then. Now they don't have a budget?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Now we're not talking about...

Rexhep Ferri: Did you know that for the first time after thirty years, I've heard that two people who said that the Modern Art Museum, the new Minister of Culture, Vlora Dumoshi⁵³ mentioned it, said that the building...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Gërmia?

Rexhep Ferri: Shopping mall, Gërmia, the one in front of the Theater, it's good for the Modern Art Museum and now the prime minister Kurti⁵⁴ said in his speech, "The War Museum should be opened, the Modern Art Museum." Thirty years, not even the Academy professors haven't mentioned it, not even you younger people have mentioned it, the elderly are done. So, sometimes you do to yourself what even an enemy wouldn't do.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you remember the day when the Gallery of Arts opened in Boro Ramiz?

Rexhep Ferri: Yes, yes.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You were part of the group exhibition.

Rexhep Ferri: When the Gallery of Arts opened, [Pajazit Nushi](#) was...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Head of BVI of Culture.⁵⁵

⁵³ Former Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports in the Republic of Kosovo.

⁵⁴ Albin Kurti (1975) leading activist and former leader of Vetëvendosje!, and currently Prime Minister of Kosovo. In 1997, he was the leader of the student protests against school segregation and the closing of the Albanian language schools.

⁵⁵ BVI for Culture was the Bureau of Self-Governing Interests that dealt with the cultural sector in the Autonomous Province of Kosovo during the Yugoslav times. Today, the Bureau would have been equivalent to the Ministry of Culture.

Rexhep Ferri: Not culture, he was the deputy head in the government or something, there was a vacancy there and I didn't like that at all.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Why, can you explain?

Rexhep Ferri: Because it was a bigger place and it wasn't an institution of its own. As bad as the Gallery [today] is, it's an institution in its own right. They opened it. I was at that dinner and I was young, I was braver to react and say, "It isn't something to brag as much about," that's what I said.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did it bother you that it was...

Rexhep Ferri: He said, "We still have the schools," Pajazit said to me, "our schools are still with stools."

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Stools, yes.

Rexhep Ferri: Stools (laughs). But, we were colleagues here, we were both academics. He was a good man, but it's true that... there are some things people do just out of spite, to preserve their heritage, to double, to triple their heritage. If you don't double the cultural heritage, triple it, you are not a nation in perspective because many things are forgotten, sparkling that is too much, that go beyond human nature and beyond the general nature.

Is there a better light than natural light? There isn't, it's very suitable for your portrait {points to the interviewer}, but what can we do, we're in the middle of natural light and your portrait, we have come to artificial light and masked portrait, brushed, modeled, modeled by plastic surgery, by all kinds of things, unrecognizable. This also affects life's psychology, it also affects dedication. How can I give life to my work and then have somebody hand it behind their door because they don't understand them, or they're not good, or they want to put up the work of someone they're related to, that's selfishness.

These things happened even before throughout history. El Greco was the only one in Spain, a Greek man who was maybe even born in Spain, who devoted his whole life to painting and he was known for around two hundred years, but not as known as he is now. Spanish people wanted to have their own person.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did the fact that such a generation of artists was created bring back a kind of national self-confidence or identity? When this art class returned from Belgrade, did it focus [the art scene] in some form?

Rexhep Ferri: Look, at that time, we experienced a renaissance or a second rebirth, not the one from Naim Frashëri's⁵⁶ time, but it was a second rebirth for us, and that required strong people, it didn't require opportunists, it didn't require traders, it required people with personalities who didn't have any other intentions. Now, I don't know why we're allergic to those values, why we don't recognize those values. We didn't listen as much because we didn't try to. We forgot them on purpose. I can't talk against my students, since I gave my youth to students, I was their professor and you're young, maybe you can understand, I don't have bad intentions, I'm just furious, I have to say it quietly, not to be heard.

A student who hasn't finished her studies says, "I found a new style." And all our newspapers, the television say, "She found a new style." I don't understand how we can let some curators from outside, not inside, propose our artworks for the Biennale, for everyone. One from Germany, the other from Vienna. Didn't we have people [here]? Our biggest misfortune is that we let people who we call curators lead us. We need managers who put the culture of a nation on display, and raise its value with their presentation.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was happening parallelly as the Gallery opened, the university did as well. What was happening? I mean, there was the Artist's Club, there was also the Association...

Rexhep Ferri: Back then, the associations were active and their role was very important, and foreign people didn't come to tell us what to do, and we took part in Yugoslav exhibits, they didn't come, we chose who went there, also in the jury. But, I don't know. There's a stagnation in culture {moves forward}, there's also the problem that during these years, there's another century, generations changed, beliefs changed, concepts on life changed, on art and everything. I'm not saying since the moment when humans, God died for humans, but if God died for humans, then humans die for humans. Because people need support, but not the kind of support where you don't learn to walk on your own feet, but for support...

We have strongly believed that we are a tribal people and I honestly say, you have probably understood and you can see it, we weren't such a nation in the way we praise ourselves in folk songs. We don't have the people we had, who we trusted. Now we have started to not believe even in ourselves and by not believing in ourselves comes work and disappointment in the profession, you aren't very dedicated. You try to do things as fast as possible. You try to present a work before even finishing it, putting a painting in an exhibit before it even dries, before it even stays and speaks to you in the atelier. Does it speak to you, doesn't it? When Michelangelo painted *David*, he hit it with a hammer, "Speak! Why aren't you speaking?" [quotes Michelangelo] And it has the mark where he hit it with the hammer. How can I take my painting which hasn't even dried yet to an exhibit, not knowing if it speaks or not, figuratively.

⁵⁶ Naim Frashëri was an Albanian poet and writer (1846-1990). He was one of the most prominent figures of the *Rilindja Kombëtare* (National Awakening), the nineteenth century Albanian national movement, together with his two brothers Sami and Abdyl. He is widely regarded as the national poet of Albania.

Part Six

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did '81 start for you?

Rexhep Ferri: Well, the year '81 doesn't start in '81. The new century, I mean it didn't start in 2000, but there's always something that precedes it. During the '70s, when I was on the third level of education, a new spirit of postmodern art and life started. So, everything started with us and we were the ones who... we, from the '70s and on, Kosovo started walking on its own feet. Of course, while walking, you fall down, walls also fall down, and a lot of things fall with time. Maybe even from... we didn't walk fast, but since we had slept for 500 years...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Were all of these [changes] dramatic?

Rexhep Ferri: Then we tried... there's something inside people that the mind doesn't control, something else controls it. I'm not a saint to know what controls people. But, whether we wanted to or not, we didn't want to speed up the pace, but we did. We wanted to be... to forget our primitivism as soon as possible, our suffering, our slavery, our poverty, and while forgetting those, we also forgot many things that were noble. We forgot the warmth among people. People were poorer than they are now, but they loved each other more than they do today. I don't know if you understand this or not because you're a new generation, I don't know if you're right or not, when you think that everything begins with you.

The postmodern I mentioned, it's just a reasonable denial since it's a child that cannot be born. Why can't it be born? Because it doesn't have the commodity. The 20th century was a century which made use of all the encyclopedias we have on civilization of all times, all civilization and reached a... I know the bicycle was in the beginning, in Peja, during the '50s, I went from Gjakova to Peja to the *Shkolla e Mesme e Artit* with a taxi made out of wood, it had a stove behind, the wood was in bags in the back and the driver, "Come, fill up the stove," we did *ra ba ba* [onomatopoeia]. There was snow, we filled up the stove with wood, "Let's go" (smiles). It took four hours to get to Peja. This was the year when I was a student in Peja, '54-'55-'56, around that time.

Now they talk to each other, "Why did you take my spot?" There's enough buses. So, denial isn't good when its purpose is to forget. But if you find an opportunity where you can start off, continuing from a point that another generation left. But not on purpose, now the borders are open, we all traveled and saw everything. You can see everything on television now.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was denied and are you trying to say that that kind of denial brought some kind of political revolt?

Rexhep Ferri: No, look, maybe it also was the new time, or what can I call it, which is before a very big test and [they need to] find themselves, so, of course, something will be left from this century, because history is ruthless, history isn't a mother. There are many centuries which we don't know anything about. People lived during those centuries, they created something, but we have come to a time where in the same place, Persia and Syria, where cursive writing was born. You know what I'm talking about?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes, yes.

Rexhep Ferri: Those tiles are ceramics which went through firing and they're in museums and I have seen people today stepping on them breaking them trying to steal something, in case there's gold or something. I don't know if... they violate their past. Do you know that part, we have committed great sins. We have demolished a series of monuments, statues that were the beginning of human thought, the beginning of civilization. The influence of religion, the influence of ignorance, some national hatred, some dark Byzantium.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: As priority and cultural towards each other. But can we go back to '81, I want to know how...

Rexhep Ferri: In '81, in '81, there was a huge interruption in our culture because human orientations not only require motivation, but also the philosophical requirements about life changed. I said, "Stay for a while, we want to work on something else." I was supposed to open an exhibit in '81 in Paris, but I didn't. My second exhibition, it never happened, the war began, then the aftermath of war, then a lot of work, the requirements changed.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Do you remember the day the protest started and the insecurity the academic staff felt because of the students?

Rexhep Ferri: Look, our students were very {pauses and breathes}, very sacrificing. I've heard my students saying, "I don't spare my life more than this cigarette." But that student, that student wasn't a student from the time I was a student because when I was a student, no one could think that you could go to war with Serbia, with Yugoslavia who had 22 million people. I don't know if... but with our figuration, figuratively we brought up those students, we educated them without any worries, because we had them ourselves, and they don't mention this because the time of all other flavors arrived. Life has one thousand flavors. How are we going to forget the past? How are we going to forget the 20th century? Because the 20th century bothers us, which is somehow an obstacle, because the 20th century created, gave rise to a lot of geniuses.

All the inventions happened in the 20th century but there's no space for, you have to get rid of half of the things to empty the pages (smiles) to put... but, I would ask a question. During this time, there's been, there's been myths, there was Picasso, there was Miró, before them there was Van Gogh, before Van Gogh, there was Rembrandt from Holland. Now I don't know if time is working on creating big personalities or on uniforms for everyone to look beautiful, everyone to be dressed the same, all

women to be beautiful. I don't know if you understand. It has started, look at the women who work in television, they look like they're all sisters, doing plastic surgery.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: These are standards pushed by the media, I mean...

Rexhep Ferri: You know the media, now that you're mentioning media, but do you know what media was? You couldn't publish an article that would harm the personality of a person, that was against the country, against that newspaper. Now it's the opposite.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: The status of the media has changed because now it's treated more as a business. I wanted to ask you something. Do you remember the day when you had to leave the University of Prishtina forcefully? How did that day happen in '89, '90, '91, these years... because you founded it, I'm interested in your perspective. Since the day when you, all the academic staff of the Academy of Arts didn't have access to institutions. How did you organize?

Rexhep Ferri: Look, as educated and knowledgeable a person could be, they can't be that farsighted. When we were fired, Muslim was fired before me, and they brought me his students and I didn't take them, so they fired me too. It was their plan, they were waiting...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: A reason.

Rexhep Ferri: Yes, and they kept us locked in a room, an office as big as this {points around the office} where a Serbian man wouldn't come, I don't want to mention his name, he was ashamed because Muslim had helped him a lot.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Karalejić?⁵⁷

Rexhep Ferri: No, no it was Arsić,⁵⁸ but whatever. A Bosniak from Rožaja would come, when his father died, we went to his house and we saw his grandfather's pictures with national Albanian clothes and we didn't even know he could speak Albanian. He came to provoke us, Muslim was very intelligent and he understood it, he also was brave, but he knew how to be brave. He said, "You're a Russophile," he didn't say Serbophile, he didn't dare to, but he said Russophile and he understood him and got up on his feet and said, "I am," because he only spoke Serbian, never Albanian, only that day he said a couple

⁵⁷ Zoran Karalejić (1937) was born in Prizren, Kosovo. He studied sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Pristina and Belgrade. He worked at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Pristina until 1999. During the Milosević regime, his artistic practice was politicized. Though he was primarily a modernist sculptor, in the '90s he was commissioned to do many realist statues of Serbian national heroes and intellectuals, such as the Vuk Karadžić statue placed in front of the Faculty of Philology in Pristina.

⁵⁸ Svetomir Arsić - Basara (1928) was born in the village of Sevice, the Sharr-Mountains. He is a Serbian sculptor and storyteller. In 1958, he graduated from the Academy of Applied Arts in Belgrade, under Rade Stanković. Arsić was a member of the Academy of Sciences and Arts of Kosovo, and was widely known in Yugoslavia for his war monuments.

of words in Albanian, “I am more Albanian than you. I am from the Kelmendi *fis*,”⁵⁹ and he puts his hand up {puts his hand up} and recites the flag anthem. At that time, we didn’t know the flag anthem, because in school bathrooms, we knew how the bathrooms at that time were, now they’re better, if they found KR written somewhere, Kosovo Republic, the committee would come and it would be a mess. He started to sing the anthem loudly, *bam, bam, bam* {onomatopoeia} he broke the door and got out.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What was this, to gain your trust?

Rexhep Ferri: Huh?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Why did he do this? To gain your trust or...

Rexhep Ferri: No, no, out of hatred, out of rage because he told him, “You’re a Russophile.” And he, Muslim, said, “Rexhep, do you know the national anthem? I said, “No.” “You, Muslim?” He said, “No.” He said, “And this son of a dog knows instead of us. Where has he learned it?” He didn’t think of it, but I figured it out because my father went like that to open the first Albanian school in Plav during Italy’s reign, which was called *Koha e Shqipërisë* [Albanian’s Time]. I said, “He is three years older than you and from Rožaja. He had two grades in Albanian and back then, every day during the first class, they recited the anthem, so he did it for two years and didn’t forget it.” (laughs) So, these were very difficult moments, very difficult.

Our students were taken over by an euphoria, now it still isn’t time to talk, no one says clearly who started it. {Stops, pauses} They caught all groups with slogans, “Marxism, Leninism” and they caught them after three days, after a week, after a month. But, in every generation, the young people are revolutionary, and they don’t spare their lives, even though they’re younger, because, when you get older, you wouldn’t give your life. Like my students, “I don’t spare my life more than this cigarette.” But, it was also fortunate that we started with those demonstrations that we didn’t understand very well.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: You’re talking about the University in the ‘90s?

Rexhep Ferri: We’re talking about ‘81. We didn’t understand because people can’t go further than light because then you don’t know where you are. But, time is a miracle. The disintegration of Yugoslavia happened, great crimes were committed between Croats and Serbs, Serbs and Bosniaks, Vukovar, Reçak, the other, there was Jashari, the Jashari family.⁶⁰ So, the world helped us to save face, and we were prepared with what we had and that chapter ended.

⁵⁹ *Fis* is the Albanian exogamous kinship group that, like the Latin gens, includes individuals who share an ancestor. *Fis* can be defined as a patrilineal descent group and an exogamous unit whose members used to own some property in common. Membership in a *fis* is based on a common mythical male ancestor.

⁶⁰ In March 1998 Serbian troops surrounded the compound of the Jashari family, whose men were among the founders of the Kosovo Liberation Army, and killed all of them, including the women and the children. This event energized the Albanian resistance and marked the beginning of the war.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: How did the University organize in houses,⁶¹ can you tell us?

Rexhep Ferri: The University in houses operated on two tracks. One track on which people benefited from it, while on the other track people who gave everything. In my neighborhood they took 300 euros out of rent, 300 *marka*⁶² out of rent. Our salary was 20 *marka*, or ten *marka* that allegedly came from diaspora and others, like me, not that I didn't get anything, but I had to pay heating, electricity, and everyone came to my house and, in the end, me and Shaban got a piece of paper. Shaban who took 300 *marka* and Rexhep who didn't get anything, and to tell you the truth I didn't keep it. Why would I keep it?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Give it to Shaban, you could have given it to Shaban (laughs). I'm joking.

Rexhep Ferri: Actually it wasn't Shaban, someone else, but I said it now. It was Shaban's neighbor (smiles). This happened all over...

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Did the students come there and paint, or how did you organize the class?

Rexhep Ferri: It was, I, I remember the enthusiasm. I broke down a wall on the third floor because I wanted to have some kind of *çardak*,⁶³ and it was walled, but it wasn't painted. And I broke down the wall and it became like a big classroom. Now you could see that it wasn't painted, so I took some old curtains my wife had and put them there. Then it happened that those students, some girls, because girls are more thoughtful and better, they came to correct some masters' degree thesis. I took her as an assistant after, "Oh, it was so nice here." It wasn't nice, the light... (laughs). But in those difficult times, it seemed nice to them. Hope is a big thing, we hoped everything would be good, and I'm sorry that another 20 years went by and it isn't that good, it isn't that good because your life is passing by, it isn't that good because... I take a taxi everyday and the taxi driver says, "Professor, 15 of our taxi drivers these past two weeks have gone to Germany."

Part Seven

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can I go back to something personal? Did you see your father?

⁶¹ By 1991, after Slobodan Milošević's legislation making Serbian the official language of Kosovo and the removal of all Albanians from public service, Albanians were excluded from schools as well. The reaction of Albanians was to create a parallel system of education hosted mostly by private homes.

⁶² Albanian: *Marka*; German: *Deutsche Mark* was the basic monetary unit of West Germany from 1948 to 1990 and of reunited Germany from 1990 to 2001. It was used as a stable, non-official currency in various Yugoslav republics as a result of hyper-inflation of the *dinar*.

⁶³ Turk.: *çardak*, an open part, usually surrounded by railings and paved with planks, on the second floor of old houses, which served when friends visited or to stay there during summer.

Rexhep Ferri: I saw my father three times after he left when I was seven. I saw him on April 4 that I mentioned, sometime around '74, '75, 1975 when I went there because I was a professor.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Cultural exchanges between Albania and Kosovo?

Rexhep Ferri: Yes, yes, when I went there I saw him. Then I saw him after a year or two. Three times, but he got old then and died. I couldn't even go to his funeral, we weren't allowed. What can we do?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: When did your brother come back?

Rexhep Ferri: My brother didn't come back. My brother got cancer and he died three years after my father died, he left nieces there. Nostalgia is very weird, but it keeps people alive. Maybe it's like a sickness. He loved Kosovo, my brother, he was younger than me, he died twenty or thirty years ago. He died missing Kosovo. When his daughter came, she said, "Father talked about Gjakova as if it were Paris, not as Lushnja." But, the changes that are happening now in our culture, in our everyday life, in our political, economic or family morals. We are in a, we have many dilemmas ahead of us, I have less because I've lived longer, but you have a lot of dilemmas ahead. {Pauses} What will happen?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I want to end the interview with something more personal. Jakup told me you have a story about a horse when you were younger, he said it's a really good story, it might be good to document it. [Quotes Jakup Ferri] "Ask father about a horse as a kid. How he went to work with the horse and maybe you're interested in the story." Could you tell us about it? What is he talking about?

Rexhep Ferri: Don't listen to Jakup. (smiles)

Erëmirë Krasniqi: (Laughs)

Rexhep Ferri: Look, I have passed, I have a pair of shoes that were trendy back then, from Italy that my father bought me when I was three years old, two years old, I still have them, I keep them with my books. Jakup took a picture of them. Then, when they confiscated all our wealth after the war, we were a poor family {pauses}, for a short period of time we had a horse so we could use it to go to my [maternal] aunt, it was around ten kilometers from Gjakova where we left because they were checking us up from SUP, they would ask my mother, "Where's your husband?" Actually, I'll tell you another detail.

My mother had around 20 gold pieces that her father-in-law, mother-in-law, her brother-in-law, her mother, her uncle gave to her and she had that and what her husband bought and apart from the job she was doing. When autumn came, she would exchange two *lira* [for money] and buy flour, beans, cabbage, wood, these kinds of things and we thought it was summer already. But one day they came and asked my mother to go to the Internal Affairs Secretariat. She took me with her, I was little. Because she was young and we went. There was some Llaza, whom I heard later that the Albanians had saved from the Germans, and he said to my mother, "Who is he?" "My son." "How many children

do you have?" She said, "Five," he knew that my father wasn't here. He said, "You live a good life, you have gold," she didn't speak. [He] said, "Yes, I know a person you sold ten [*lira*] to."

She understood, my father didn't go to school, my father did, but she was very intelligent. Not only her, but that whole generation was very intelligent without school, because they were forced to not remember what they wrote and the mind worked more. She understood, she said, "Not ten, two." She admitted it. He said, "Not two, ten. That person is here." "Bring that person," she said, "Let's bring him." And they brought him, "Do you know this woman?" He said, "Yes." "How much gold did she sell you?" He said, "Ten." I remember my mother as if it was today, I was little, but you don't forget rare childhood events. She forgot where she was, in the office of the head of the Internal Affairs Section, at that time, because now it's easy.

She turns to that man, "Not ten, but two." He said, "Not two, ten." She said, "May God curse you! How are you not ashamed of your mustache⁶⁴ to lie like that?" Llaza said, "Take this garbage and throw him out," he said, "You're protecting your cheating friends and accusing this woman. Take him downstairs." Then he said to my mother, "Look, since you're raising your children, I will allow you two, I don't know how much you have (laughs), but if you have them, you can use two to raise your children. It's better to take care of them than leave them on the street."

So, my childhood had many obstacles, but I can conclude by saying that I've been lucky. I was lucky because I have done a lot of things. I don't bother myself with how much I've done as an artist.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Can we talk a little about, yesterday we talked about Albanian motifs within modern visual color. Could you talk about this before ending the interview? How did art develop? Which are the themes?

Rexhep Ferri: Look, I was a little more abstract, but it was also the time when the abstract was on top of the list. I was also more abstract for another reason, I didn't want to be similar to anyone, the paintings were more, more... The more a person works, they find themselves, and especially after tapestry I started, but after 50 years, I started a new cycle of paintings after tapestry, because tapestry is like all other mural painting techniques of mural paintings, of monumental art. So the materialization of the artwork, having it turned into something material. The shoes were the skin of a bison or horse and now it's shoes. After tapestry, because I studied monumental painting.

After tapestry, or in order to make tapestry paintings, I had to put my reading paintings into a system, into mathematics, two and two makes four and while doing that I knew because I would paint mosaics too, knowing that now it isn't paint but it's paint with marbles and how to place the marbles, how they have to stick to one another. Sticking them back then, there didn't need to be two, but one, and the glue in the middle of the marble. Where's the mosaic's charm?

⁶⁴ Mustache as a mark of manhood. Basically, he was asked: How are you not ashamed of the man you have become? Also, it can mean: You don't live up to the man you present yourself to be.

It's glue, the placement of the row, different colors of the marbles and so on. And the glue between the marbles which is its breathing, its lungs. It's the same with fresco, the same with tapestry and, after I finished I got a little tired, then the times changed, and I also changed my belief in mythology, that it isn't, there's a lot of untruth in myths and mythology. But, I lived with that mythology, those myths, with the belief that we are a noble nation. But now, since I have finished a lot of work, I say that it's not true, none of them, not the second one, not the third. We were the same as we are now.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: What are you painting now in the absence of myths? How has your art changed?

Rexhep Ferri: I just started, I am now more in the field of literature and I experiment with myself, I mix my figurative culture with my literary figure and I either put it in painting or put it in any of my writings. I want to ask you about the title of a writing I have here {pauses} *Fjala e parafjalës* [The word of preposition] I'm thinking of giving it that title. Is it abstract, is it concrete? For me, it's very concrete because in the drawings that cave people made, the bison is not a written word, therefore, it is a preposition of the word.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: I understand now.

Rexhep Ferri: Now you understand.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: There was image before language.

Rexhep Ferri: And I want this title, whoever understands, understands, whoever doesn't understand can say, {moves his hand} "Rexhep has gone mad." So, I'm now free of Rexhep Ferri as an artist. But, since I am still good at mathematics, I {pause} I deal with many things that are, that have a very good national value, but that we have destroyed. We have made so many bad folklore songs, so many heroes and heroines, *ba ba ba* {onomatopoeia}, so many wars that didn't even happen, so many Mic Sokols,⁶⁵ as the President [Hashim Thaçi] said, "I am the president of two million presidents." This is folklore, but I try to extract the myth from the folklore, extract it out, and I forget even myself and I paint or write.

But, when I look back, I still couldn't stray from Rexhep Ferri because I've done that for 60 years. It impacted me. But, what's new? It's new because something that I forgot was good for painting. My recent paintings, these last years, I can't say that they're more dramatic, more powerful, I can't say that, but even the times were then more dramatic, more powerful. I'm relieved. I'm relieved because when Picasso entered the atelier, he painted with the colors he had there, he didn't care if he was missing a color, he took another... and to me, some say, "There's more colors in your paintings now," you buy colors in the store. I saw color even back then, but there was no color in here {touches his

⁶⁵ Mic Sokoli (1839–1881) was an Albanian nationalist figure and guerrilla fighter from the Tropoja district in today's Northern Albania. He was a noted guerrilla leader, remembered in particular for an act that has entered the chronicles of Albanian legend as an example of heroism: at the battle of Slivova against Ottoman forces in April 1881, he died when he pressed his body against the mouth of a Turkish cannon.

chest on the heart's side}, it was black and white here, that's why it seemed too much to me. I, look, it isn't a copy of folklore. {points to a painting in front of him} What do I say?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: It's interpretation?

Rexhep Ferri: There's another one that matches it, it's here {points behind}, but now we don't have... I am glad I am more free now, but still me. I've lost the fear. I've gone so far that I'm not even scared of death, honestly.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Very important for you. Okay, I think we should end the interview here.

Rexhep Ferri: End it here (laughs), with this sentence?

Erëmirë Krasniqi: Yes, I think it's best to end it here. You surpassed death.

[The video interview was edited]

Rexhep Ferri: I would be very sorry if your generation doesn't produce even bigger personalities than the last century in our culture. A lot of misfortune happened to us. Did you stop? [Addresses the camera person] a lot of misfortune has happened in our cultural life. A hundred years before {pauses} Naim Frashëri, father of our Romanticism, Byron passed through Albanian territories, father of world's Romanticism, the great English poet, and heard the folklore songs that were in a poetry heard at Ali Pashë Telepena, we didn't write them as poetry, but for example [recites] "*O bylbyl të bëra benë në të gjetsha dot folenë, do ta marrë ta hedh në lumë, se na lanë çupat pa gjumë.*" [Oh nightingale I swore if I found your nest, I would throw it in the river, since the girls are left sleepless] But Albanian poetry, the anthology of Albanian poetry, of Romanticism should start with that or the other [recites] "*Ulu në mal të dali hana, ulu mal,*" [Mountain, lower down so the moon can come out, mountain lower down], the mountain sat down, but the moon didn't come out. Now, *tra la la, tra la la* {onomatopoeia}.

In figurative arts, there's Edward Lear. I don't know if you know Edward Lear. I can show you if I have it here. I have a book by Edward Lear published in English two hundred years ago in America. It's a rare copy of his graphic paintings. Why graphics? Then there was no flat press, like today {points to the work in his right}. There was high press or deep press and that book is published in two techniques, the text, his diary is with a high press and his paintings are with a deep press, like Fatmir Krypa's graphics. Plate engraving. His landscapes, because he was a good landscape painter, he came to Albania by chance and he traveled the whole country. When he left Shkodra, it's in his diary, Gjele Kokoti said to him, who followed him throughout his whole life and who buried him, and his own grave is next to his, he is buried with him, with Gjele Kokoti. He was a vagabond, a boy who grew up in ships here and there, he learned Turkish, Greek, Italian, French, English. All the time on ships and he took him. The light of Edward Lear's landscapes still doesn't exist in Albanian landscapes.

Erëmirë Krasniqi: The landscapes from which parts?

Rexhep Ferri: No, no, from Albanian landscapes, because there are only all the castles and he visited all of Albania in that book, but now I can't get up, I don't know if I have it here or at home. And we didn't use that light. None of the painters. I am talking about the period of romanticism and realism. In our landscapes, there was natural light, artificial light, there was light of socialist realism that was the make-up that now they're making women like dolls, but there was no divine light. In Edward Lear's landscapes, there's divine light and I feel sorry. A friend actually told me, "Why don't you write?" I can't, now that I'm old I can't...

That divine light wasn't repeated, that's why we went through some difficulties. For 500 years, we have been enslaved by a kind of cultural darkness and at the same time spiritual. The spiritual side was upheld {pauses} by people's minds, learning songs by heart, and back then, they could learn one thousand verses by heart. Now I don't even know ten verses from my books by heart. Why? Because I rely on books which are right there, and when I'm with myself, I don't want to see anyone. The moment I'm done with work I want to meet someone I love, but now those people I know aren't here anymore. The person I knew isn't anymore. People, I don't know if they've lost their way or not, but people are seeking people, to rely on something, because they have started to forget God because it bothers them, or He doesn't exist or what do I know, I will not get into that. People don't trust other people, then it comes down to the right hand not trusting the left hand. People have become more egotistical. When I say egotistical, I mean, if you give them half of the world they would say, "It's not much, give me the rest of it..."