

INTERVIEW WITH ZENUN ÇELAJ

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Duration: 323 minuta

Present:

1. Zenun Çelaj (Speaker)
2. Aurela Kadriu (Interviewer)
3. Besarta Breznica (Camera)

Transcription notation symbols of non-verbal communication:

() – emotional communication

{ } – the speaker explains something using gestures.

Other transcription conventions:

[] – addition to the text to facilitate comprehension

Footnotes are editorial additions to provide information on localities, names or expressions.

Part One

Aurela Kadriu: Let's start with... if you can introduce yourself and talk about your early childhood memories. So, anything you remember from your childhood. Your family, where you grew up...

Zenun Çelaj: So, it doesn't necessarily have to be about Prishtina?

Aurela Kadriu: No, no.

Zenun Çelaj: Okay.

Aurela Kadriu: We're talking about your life, then if in a particular moment it connects to Prishtina.

Zenun Çelaj: I am Zenun Çelaj, I come from a northern village in Montenegro, Vuthaj, valley of Plava and Gucia. A very historical area and natural beauty. Very rare, beautiful. Not because it's my hometown, but because it is. Other people have also said this. I come from a family of shepherds, they had a lot of sheep. We were a big family and I'm practically the first to get an education in my family, which had over 60 members scattered across the border.

I'm talking about Montenegro and Albania, since the village was located like that, it had the properties there. At that time there were no borders, then the borders were created and we didn't see our relatives there for decades, nor did we know about their lives, nor about their fate as they didn't for us. I finished the first four grades of primary school in my hometown, I am the second generation after the Second World War, in Albanian language in that valley, that area. Whereas, I finished the rest of primary school in Guci.

Students from other villages would also come, Albanians from Plava and Gucia. I finished the educational high school, which was called *Shkolla Normale*¹ back then, I started in Peja, it closed down

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

in Peja and I moved to Peja with the other students of that generation. After a year it closed down and I went to Prizren, from Prizren to Prishtina. So I started in 1954/55 and finished it in '59/'60 in Prishtina.

Before graduating, because back then you graduated high school, there was a job vacancy at *Rilindja*, I'm talking about 1960, when *Rilindja* had been coming out every day for two years, I was around 16, 15 years old. I applied and got accepted as a journalist, I still wasn't even 20 years old yet. And I worked from then to when *Rilindja* closed down. So until 1999, while in the year 2000, I was the first editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper *Zëri*, which came as a sequel to *Zëri të Rinisë*, until 2009. While from that year up to today, I am the editor-in-chief of the online magazine *Koha.net*, I don't know until when, maybe until I turn 80 years old.

Aurela Kadriu: Uncle Zenun, I would like to... Thank you for offering us a kind of skeleton of your life. I would like to know more about these periods, tell us in more detail. I want to know about your childhood in Vuthaj, you mentioned you were a big family. What was your life like? How do you remember your life in Vuthaj? What kind of memories do you have?

Zenun Çelaj: Now at this age, 80 years old, people are nostalgic (cries). About my childhood, it wasn't easy. There weren't many Albanians there, but it was decided, the borders between Albania and Yugoslavia were reset. The treatment by the people who worked at the order, but also Serbs in general, unfortunately party Bosnians, who later were called Muslim, weren't friendly. So, we had to be careful and ready for a fight with them, as it has happened to us.

I started elementary school in Gucia, because the population in Vuthaj is all Albanian and we didn't have problems with the non-Albanian population, but with soldiers at the border. In Gucia there were Montenegrins and Bosnians who often offended us on national basis, but probably the nature... they had built us up as more brave than we were supposed to be, we often had fights with them. Luckily we always came out victorious and at some point they got used to us, they didn't mistreat us anymore.

We were mainly taught in Serbo-Croatian, as the teachers called it then, Montenegrin-Serbo-Bosnian teachers. Albanians, there was only one Albanian, Rexhep Agaj, Ahmet Rexhep Agaj, who traveled by bicycle every day from Plava and came to Gucia to teach us as much as he could. He taught us history, the literature was limited in Albanian language. Until 1952, when a priest came from Albania with his sister, his name was Prak Ndrëvashaj. He was an intellectual of a very high level, I later understood and realized his value.

He was a student of the writer Ndre Mjeda, he often talked about Mjeda and about moments when he would write poetry. Unfortunately, back then I didn't know how to value those moments and I didn't take notes about that, I just remember it. Later I thought about it, because in the meantime he moved out of Yugoslavia, he went to Italy and then to the United States of America. He led the Catholic Church here.

From Vuthaj, with a group of students we enrolled in Peja, in Albanian school, we had to travel from there to Peja, which is around 90 kilometers away. We had to walk in the... mountain, it was called

Qafa e Dilit, of the other part Qafa e Çakorrit, which now is a border problem between... it's a border problem between Kosova and Montenegro.

We walked 90 kilometers to Peja, a group of students in snow, bad weather. We went to enroll... or in the days when we had longer breaks than four or five days, there were some national holidays, November 29 and May 1, we didn't usually come for New Year's Eve because we didn't... it wasn't convenient to come for three days and go back again.

A very long journey, very troublesome and with many dangers, the danger of freezing as it had happened to many people in mountains. Because at that time surprisingly, there was even more snow, they were harder times. Also in Peja there weren't any dormitories and the material conditions weren't good. So, these were some of the sufferings, and sometimes there were even more basic sufferings such as for food, but there were also solidarity.

I can say the Albanian professors had a great understanding and supported us, they motivated us to be better students and later give our contribution as teachers there. But I didn't do that since I started with journalism, where I also gave my contribution, whether in attracting people, young people from our country to be educated or in some other form.

I can say that is one of the villages and in general one of the Albanian villages there who have produced many intellectuals, who were also distinguished in national dimensions, I'm talking about the Qosja brothers, Rexhep Qosja, Isa Qosja. One in the field of film and the other in literature, or in other sciences, like Isuf Dedusha in medicine, Isuf Ulaj and many others.

Aurela Kadriu: As I can calculate in my head, you went to elementary school around '45-'46.

Zenun Çelaj: '46, I wasn't even... I wasn't even six years old.

Aurela Kadriu: What was that time like?

Zenun Çelaj: Now...

Aurela Kadriu: Immediately after the Second World War.

Zenun Çelaj: It was immediately after the Second World War, in '45 the Albanian elementary school was opened for the first time. Actually, sometimes in the '30s there was a school, ex-Yugoslavia had opened it and had brought Albanian teachers. Josip Relja had worked in that school, but the students learned in Serbian, almost not at all in Albanian. So, this was the first time, only in the time that was called Albanian's time. In the years when Albania was occupied by Italians, but even back then the school didn't function. So, you can say that I belong to the second generation who started to learn Albanian in that area in '46. In Gusia also...

Aurela Kadriu: Do you remember the Second World War?

Zenun Çelaj: I remember a little, I remember as much as a toddler can remember. I remember that as a family, we had a bigger house and we had many migratory guests who passed through there. There was a road which connected Kosova to Shkodra and guests always came to sleep at our house. Among other things, I remember that in our house, on one floor there were the partisans and on the other the volunteers who protected Albanian territory. I can't say whether they were fascists or pro-fascists, but they were nationalists, I later realized that, I didn't know then. Surely those elders of the house knew that those... tolerances between... volunteers and partisans were enemies. However, they kept them secret. Some on one floor, the other on the other floor. They didn't know about each other.

But I remember that when I was on the floor with the partisans I knew how to say, "Death to fascism" {explains with his hands} with my fist to my forehead, I would go there more often because they all would stand up and it seemed interesting to me (laughs). These are those elements. I remember, there was, they used to call her Vokshi's daughter, she was a warrior from Gjakova... I also understood this later, back then I didn't know, but when I became a journalist I met her. She is from Asim Vokshi's family, she was a warrior. She was a wounded woman in uniform. I know that my mother took care of her... so this is what I remember?

Aurela Kadriu: Did you live with your extended family?

Zenun Çelaj: Very... I said, we were a big family since we also had property. We had property in Plava and Gusia, in villages Krusheva, Martnak, in Albania in Valbona. We were scattered, but we were constantly 20-25 people in the house.

Aurela Kadriu: How did it work? How many generations lived together?

Zenun Çelaj: Now, I remember we were up to five generations in one house. According to old traditions, there was one head of the household who was chosen as the smartest and the bravest. They also had to be brave. So, the head of the house gave us our roles. We knew who was shepherd, we knew who was going to cultivate, who would trade, who would apply the house. We usually supplied in Peja, the gourd there didn't produce much, just farming, the other... we could be supplied with bread for two or three months, the other things were bought in Peja.

Aurela Kadriu: Did you deal with that kind of work?

Zenun Çelaj: I was the youngest son in the family and I immediately went to school, I didn't do any of that work. One summer I looked after lambs and I remember that as one of the main things I did there.

Aurela Kadriu: The elementary school you went to for the first four years in the village, it was all in Albanian, right?

Zenun Çelaj: It was all in Albanian, yes, because even the teacher was Albanian and... It seems like from our village, it doesn't seem so, it was so, in the time of ex-Yugoslavia, people would flee from

Serbian problems and came to school in Shkodra. Many finished school there, elementary school, not high school, because high school was considered as university is now. And they came back and taught us because there were many students then. We were the generation, in my generation there were around 70-80-90 students. Unfortunately... only in the first grade. While not after all these years, there aren't any students in first grade.

Aurela Kadriu: Now?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, there aren't... there are just a few residents, they all moved mostly to America or here in Kosova, but there are only a few people and most elders.

Aurela Kadriu: I'm interested to know, since you mentioned this demographic fact, what was it like in classrooms? Were there any girls in the first grade?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, then after the war, it was also a legal obligation. From my family, we were nine people who went to first grade. We were... Even though we weren't all the same age. I was the youngest, and the oldest was three years older than me, there were three girls from the nine of us.

Aurela Kadriu: In general in school...

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, the first four grades, and after that there weren't any. There weren't any from my village or any other village. It was... there was an Albanian population, both Muslim and Catholic. There were two Catholic girls, Diella and Lena, I remember them. I don't know what happened to them, I don't know if they continued their education after I went to Peja, I have no idea.

Aurela Kadriu: How do you remember... how did the fact that three girls in your family went to school reflect... you probably went to school together?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, we went together. You have to consider, there... there wasn't bigotry among us ever. It is, how do I say, a country with a tradition where women were free, they traveled alone, they were shepherdesses, they worked, they traveled from the village to the mountains alone, there weren't any obstacles. But of course moral norms were very harsh.

They had to... women, even if she got married the day before... Now we're talking, maybe ethnography should talk about this. But if a guest or whoever came and yelled at the door, "Man of the house!" And if the bride didn't come out and say, "Welcome." And invite the person inside, offer food and everything, then they wouldn't keep her because she would embarrass the family. Some, some interesting laws. Welcoming, Albanian welcome is often mentioned.

Aurela Kadriu: This was just a degression...

Zenun Çelaj: Yes.

Aurela Kadriu: I was interested to know that dynamic. How many siblings did you have?

Zenun Çelaj: Personally... We were three brothers and two sisters. A brother died early of meningitis disease, I later learned that it was meningitis, in '51, he died very early. Yes, one of our sisters died in America, one of my sisters is still alive and one of my brothers who lives in America like many others.

Aurela Kadriu: How was life in the immediate family in this wide family circle? Was there a closeness between siblings nonetheless?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, certainly.

Aurela Kadriu: Since you were a big family, a few generations.

Zenun Çelaj: Look, I am talking about the tradition in our family. In our family, women had the right to own five sheep and they could do anything they wanted with their wool. They had the right to have a herd of chickens, they could do anything they wanted with chicken's eggs, sell them or whatever she wanted.

Also there existed... now my father, my mother with her other children also weaved, how do I say, that cloth, for clothes, what do I know. So mini-economy existed within that immediate family. There was the other part, dairy and all of that, because as I said, we mostly had sheep. We got the dairy for the whole family. Food was served according to age. Men, actually children first, then men, and women last, so we ate together.

Aurela Kadriu: When you went to Gusia, was school different? You mentioned that the school was mixed. How do you remember it?

Zenun Çelaj: Now from my village to Gusia, it's somewhere up to five kilometers, it depends because the village is very open. And... so, from which point to where you're going, but around four to five kilometers. There we initially had a problem communicating with the children of the village, they spoke Bosnian, we spoke Albanian. So we were closer with each other, and we had more solidarity with each other, and they saw it as a threat.

But in the meantime, we started to learn Serbian and we started to communicate with them, fight with them, like children everywhere. We couldn't exchange texts and so on, even though we learned Serbian because the teacher would dictate them to us. Of course, we had a simpler version of lectures. Now I can't remember exactly.

Aurela Kadriu: Your family was still in Vuthaj even when you went to Peja?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, until 1970. I got married, created a family way before, and then my brother wanted to migrate to America, like many others. He had five daughters and a son. My father was a physical worker. Until then he worked in Montenegro until I finished my studies then he retired.

So after the '70s he was at that age. Since then, my father and my brother with his family came to live in Prishtina. In the meantime, my brother migrated to... from here he went to America after 1990 and I was left alone again (laughs).

Aurela Kadriu: What about Peja... *Shkolla Normale* in Peja, was it first opened in Peja?

Zenun Çelaj: No. It was in Prishtina, in Peja and Prizren. But, for us Peja was the nearest. But, from there to here we had to travel by bus or train, so almost all of us, one or two went to Prishtina, one in Prizren and the other went to Peja.

Part Two

Aurela Kadriu: Yes, we were talking about Peja, a change...

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, it was completely different. Now, things seem funny when you tell them today. Sometimes when we were coming back, we were going to Peja with two or three other friends... because in the beginning there were no women, later one came, after two or three years, there weren't any even in the elementary school in the village. We got into a truck that was carrying wood from Rugova... because the road leads to Rugova. And I noticed the driver started speaking Albanian, for us it was the biggest surprise. There are also Albanian drivers.

It seemed like... it seemed unbelievable, how do I say, we felt more proud. This was the first step, so to say. Then in Peja we started during music classes to... we listened to Albanian songs that weren't only played with lute and *çifteli*,² this was also a miracle. So, these were those moments that seem funny now but we experienced then.

Of course, there was a general poverty, it was the same for the city kids and for us who came from the village. So it didn't seem surprising, even though we had come with *opinga*.³ But, in the meantime, *opinga* and the clothes we wore were replaced with wool products. We replaced... within a short period of time we got used to it, we integrated. But of course language and the mindset affect everything. The traditions were similar to ours.

Aurela Kadriu: What about Peja, what kind of city was it?

Zenun Çelaj: Back then it was very big, it seemed very big, I was scared to get out of the street I lived in, to go to school, or to the bakery, because we lived in private homes.

² Two-string instrument with a long neck, played in Northern Albania and Kosovo, used to play folk songs and epics.

³ Similar to moccasins, made out of rubber or bovine leather, mainly used by the villagers.

Aurela Kadriu: Yes.

Zenun Çelaj: We had to buy bread... how we were fed, now it seems weird how we survived. There were times when for two, three weeks we ate only bread with tea and salt. So, this was the beginning. It was like the movies we saw later of poor people. You could see sweets in the shop and you couldn't even taste them. I said, everything was hard, but we moved past it. In the beginning we were offered to live in houses of other children to not feel the absence of our family. And so, there were changes everyday.

Aurela Kadriu: How long did you stay in Peja for?

Zenun Çelaj: A school year, a school year. Then there were the policies of that time that no Albanian cadres were created unfortunately. Later in the years as a journalist I learned that those were the regime's policies for the assimilation of Albanians as much as possible, developed by other actions that are known. Action for the collection of weapons, surplus wealth, deportation to Turkey with various pressures, arrests, murders, imprisonment, bad treatment, and so on.

Let's say that even the school system was put to this service. Peja was always the aim, especially to get in the hands of Montenegrins, to surrender it to them because there were more Montenegrins than Serbians. And it seems, they considered it a danger in school for teachers in the Albanian language, we were somewhere around four classes. In the first year, also in the second, third year, and until the fourth year... later it became the five-year *Shkolla Normale*.

They considered it dangerous and closed down the school in Peja. Only the gymnasium with two classes was left, five others were in Serbian. They told us to go elsewhere, in Gjakova. *Shkolla Normale* was opened in Gjakova with students who left Peja. But even there, the danger that we might create Albanian nationalist cadres, because only Albanian was spoken there, we only sang in Albanian, we only read in Albanian, the environment was like that. And I said, I noticed that later... no, there were separate projects. They said, "In Prishtina or in Prizren." We went to Prizren, of course, because Prizren was nearer. Anyway, I had to leave Prizren and come to Prishtina, but the rest of my class finished school there.

Aurela Kadriu: You were to Peja in '55, '56, the migration to Turkey.

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, yes.

Aurela Kadriu: Do you know the effect this had? Were there Albanians in your class who left?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, there were. There were people in my class who were mistreated. My [maternal] uncles are from Rugova, they were also persecuted. And one of my uncles was a teacher in Rugova at that time and I didn't know but at some point he came to the apartment where I lived... I lived with a student from Rahovec and a student from Montenegro, my village. And he said, "I'm coming from the police," because the police had taken him and mistreated him.

I didn't know that he was in jail for a few weeks and they had just let him go. But, under the condition that he would go to the police station everyday. Now, how could he go home to Rugova, it's a four-five hour walk, go to the police station and go back. "Can I stay?" "Of course..." So, I also experienced this segment of maltreatment of my uncle, my mother's brother.

I've heard of many others who left. I know that many families, especially from Peja, who spoke Turkish in their homes, the children would just say, "They aren't here anymore, they went to Turkey." These were sad, hurtful moments, but this was that part of history.

Aurela Kadriu: When did you go to Gjakova?

Zenun Çelaj: It was another environment in Gjakova. People from Gjakova are more friendly, we were very close. Also, there was a boarding building there, the church was used as boarding. Of course, at that time, religion was a war, that's how socialism worked. Another house that was... they had migrated, they had left since ex-Yugoslavia to Albania, Tirana, now their house was empty and they put us there, the students who came from Peja. So, there were two buildings.

This collective life creates a special atmosphere, it is much warmer, much more... formative. There are all different kinds of people who help you, who are ready to be there for you in difficult moments, hard. Even exchanging books, or thoughts during debates, that way of life helps you grow.

Aurela Kadriu: What kind of memories do you have? Since you mentioned how important the collective connection is, I'm interested to know if you remember any particular memories?

Zenun Çelaj: I do, there are bitter and pleasant memories (laughs). A... I was the youngest since... but I was also the smallest, by my age and physically. People always talk about the generation right after war. They gathered children who weren't able to go to school since there were no schools because of the war. So, there were also 20-year-olds who were in the same class as me, the six-year-old. I'm talking about elementary school.

This continues, this proportion continued even in high school. The director of the boarding, that's what we called dormitories, at that time was Sylejmon Domi, he was a warrior at that time of course, warriors had all the positions. He had bought cabbage to make pickled cabbage for the whole dormitory (laughs). Two big kegs. There was like a shack...

Aurela Kadriu: Like a barn.

Zenun Çelaj: No, a shack, houses in Gjakova and Prishtina used to have them, they had big doors. He had put the cabbage in those huge kegs. Who knows how many kilograms those weighed, 500-600 I don't know, as big as this. And when the director and the administrator left, just the students were left in the dormitory. We wanted to eat cabbage and we stole it, we ate. The next day when he noticed he got mad. He was very stern.

And maybe he didn't dare deal with the older ones, he said to me, "Come here fast!" I walked over to him, "Why did... did you eat cabbage?" "Yes," I said, to be honest. He said, "You have to leave. Take your suitcase and leave the dormitory." Where would I go? There was a, a, we called him director at that time, he was the secretary. He did everything, the dormitory didn't have a cashier, except the cooks, there were only these two, the director and him. I don't know if you've heard, Riza Binishi was his father, I found out later because Riza became my brother-in-law, that happened.

And he, he felt so bad that... I took my suitcase that I knew I had, there was one person who was related to my cousin, I thought I would look for him, I'd go spend the night there and see what happens. I walked up to the small *çarshi* with my suitcase. It was heavy, made out of wood, they weren't like today. When I heard the secretary say, "Zenun, come back." I went back. He said, "I convinced him someone, he forgives you. He'll forgive you this one time."

He threatened me, he said, "If you do one more thing, you can leave." This was the bitter part. The other story is funny. There was a teacher, Sami Bashora from Gjakova. He used to say that he participated as a pioneer in the war, back then it was cool to say you were in the war. It was the same as today with the UÇK,⁴ but back then with the National Liberation War. In the house where we lived, it was a dormitory, there wasn't water and things like that, it was like a *hamamxhik*.⁵ There were, we took cans, do you know what they are?

Aurela Kadriu: Yes, yes.

Zenun Çelaj: We got water there, we got water from the well. Our classes were after dinner, from 7:30 to 9:30 in the evening. We each sat to learn. The class was over, the teacher bowed down to get some water, a student from Junik, a student hit him with his finger {shows with his hand} behind. He hit him in the butt. He got up and the first... the one who hit him was from Peja, but he walked fast, the student from Junik was behind him. He slapped him *bam* {onomatopoeic} "Sneaky boy. You're hitting a warrior."

I mean, of course we laughed. We laughed even during our studies when we rejoined the Faculty here in Prishtina. I have memories like this. Or the other one... I still hadn't got the money my father sent from Montenegro for my education. And the janitor back then brought the mail and the money, at that time. I would ask him everyday, "Did he come? Did he come?" I had a friend... Am I talking too much?

Aurela Kadriu: No, no worries.

Zenun Çelaj: He was from Strelc, Peja, he was financially stable, he would give me money to pay for the dormitory, I didn't have money. The money was almost two months late and they invited me to go out. But, we went out together, but my friend also ran out of money. Where would we go? We didn't

⁴ *Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës* - Kosovo Liberation Army, was an Albanian guerrilla paramilitary organisation that sought the separation of Kosovo from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbia during the 1990s.

⁵ Small bathroom inside the room.

have a place to eat. But, he had a watch, I didn't even have a watch. And we went to a sweetshop called Gexhra, I never forgot it.

We went there, we said, "Can we eat something?" We were hungry. He said... because they let us sleep there, but there was no food. It was some sort of pressure. Our friends... but there wasn't enough food in the dormitory then. "I'll leave my watch as a pledge." He left the watch there, and we ate there for two days. After two days, the janitor came and said, "Your money is here." We went and paid, he had kept the watch. I mean, there are different kinds of moments.

Aurela Kadriu: Before we talk about the time you came to Prishtina the first time, I wanted to ask if there exists... because earlier you mentioned you were the first one to get an education in the family...

Zenun Çelaj: In the family, yes.

Aurela Kadriu: Did the pressure to continue school come from you? Or from your father?

Zenun Çelaj: Now, I... at that time, they all said I was the best student, even though I was the youngest. My teacher, as I said, Ahmet Rexhepagaj, who was cousins with Jashar Rexhepagaj, was an academic, he died five-six years ago. He was the father of the singer, Rexhepagiq. We called him Rexhepagaj. I used to envy how he dressed, with some dark clothes, white shirt, tie, black shoes. I used to want to be like him. This was... (laughs) one of my inspirations.

But also my father. He went to madrasah and he always told me, "You have to get an education." I said, "What do you want me to study?" He said, "I want you to go to madrasah, but it's my responsibility to educate you." And interesting education that now frustrates you when you hear it from educated people, I mean from religious branches who say that only Muhammad, only the mosque, only... he didn't, he said, "It's my responsibility to educate you."

This stimulated me. So, this was the reason why I went to school. Also the perspective in that place was... when I grew up I started to also think about that. I could have either become a shepherd or farmer, nothing else. So, I had to learn more so I wouldn't go back to those professions.

Aurela Kadriu: What about your other siblings, were they younger or older than you.

Zenun Çelaj: No, they were all older. My oldest sister, she didn't get an education, later, while... she is married in Kosova. She got married young. She learned writing and reading, but she doesn't have an education. My second sister, as I said, she died in America, she was in the same class as I, she was an excellent student, but she didn't continue her education... only what she read herself in the meantime.

Her husband... her husband was an emigrant from Albania and he was established and she got windows of opportunities. My brother, he finished the first four grades in elementary school in Serbian, in Rela's time, as I mentioned. But it seems like those four years were very important. When he came to

Prishtina, he finished elementary school, and high schools with courses. He worked at KosovaFilm as a distributor.

Aurela Kadriu: Now, I want to talk about another period in your life, when you first came to Prishtina was quite a big change in your life. I'm interested to know when did you come?

Zenun Çelaj: When I left Prizren, I'll tell you the reason, very childish, what happened. In psychology class, a Montenegrin was our teacher, because there wasn't a cadre for many classes in Albanian at that time. Mira Mijović, I never forgot her name, explained to us about the influence of the nature factor on the formation of characters, I don't know if you learned psychology or not... and she takes Montenegrins as an example.

She said, "For example, they're not musical because they grew up in an altitude above the sea, mountains, a lot of storms, so they don't develop tones because they are lost by the wind, storms. So they lose that feeling." And I, as a child, said in Serbian "*I gluplji su*" ["*And they're more stupid*"] from my seat, we were learning in Serbian, "They're also more stupid." The translation.

She was very mean, she didn't say anything, she didn't yell at me, she just said, "Get out." I left the classroom, I went from an excellent student to getting grade two in all the subjects in Serbian, it was a failing grade. The first half of the semester went like that, I got five or six grade twos, which was a failing grade. I thought that things would change after the first semester, but it was the same. I didn't know, only Rexhep Qosja and Hasan Mekuli were in Prishtina from my area, there were only letters, no phones back then.

I wrote them a letter, "I am in this situation, I'm failing the class... could I come to Prishtina?" They had talked, I was enrolled here in Prishtina and continued. But I was also in Prishtina when I first came to enroll in high school, around '55, '56. I came, I wanted to enroll... there was a student here, Hasan Xhekaj, he was the number one handball player in Kosova.

He said, "If you can go to Peja because it's nearer. It's quite far here... there's no one you can turn to." You know, we didn't have any relatives, but still people moved around. So I went to Peja, I enrolled there. So, that was the first, and then when I left Prizren and came here.

Aurela Kadriu: How did you come the first time?

Zenun Çelaj: The first time I came from Peja by train, because back then buses were very rare, the only way was to go through Istrog, through Gjyrakocv and come to Mitrovica, then go around either to Gjakova, Prizren and to come back to Prishtina, which was very far. So... by train was the easiest way. Of course I came here from Prizren by bus, yes

Aurela Kadriu: Do you remember what the train station was like in Prishtina?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, like it is now, of course more dirty, because I went there one day... to see it, it was cleaner, more tidy. Back then it was dirty, there was tar all over the gourd, of course so it wouldn't, so it would be some kind of isolation from the mud of people who passed by there. So, the same as it is now. Because it was built, I think when it was built in 19... who knows, I don't remember now when it happened.

Aurela Kadriu: How do you remember Prishtina the first time you came, and then if you could tell me if you noticed any changes the second time you came?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, there changes. The first time I came to the building where the Assembly of Kosovo was, there was only one wing built, while further away, where the Unity and Brotherhood monument is, now it's called the Triangle, but also further away, the part where some kind of shopping craft center used to be, it was all covered. With shops. I remember vaguely how it was covered, it seemed weird but there was a lot of dust, it was very dirty.

I know there were craftsmen shops on both sides, blacksmiths, silver shops and so on, it was big. There were... now this is how much I remember as a 15-year-old who came to a city for the first time. So, there might have been around 20-30 shops on both sides.

Aurela Kadriu: When you say from the monument, you mean from the monument and on or...

Zenun Çelaj: No, it started from the monument, not where the Municipality is, but on the other side, where taxes, not taxes...

Aurela Kadriu: Where Gërmia used to be?

Zenun Çelaj: Not Gërmia, not Gërmia, it used to be OSCE, or I don't know which building was there, in front of the Assembly on this side {shows with his hands}.

Part Three

Aurela Kadriu: Was this what is now called the covered bazaar?

Zenun Çelaj: Now, where... no, not there, that's further away. This is near the Assembly of Kosova. Do you know where the old post office used to be?

Aurela Kadriu: Yes.

Zenun Çelaj: The one that was bombed? So it was in that direction, at the old post office that was bombed, it started there, then since that time there was the *korzo*,⁶ the cars didn't go through there.

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There were a few restaurants, bookshops, and on the left, there was a dentist, there was a, we used to call it the summer garden. These were there until recently, these that I mentioned.

Aurela Kadriu: What was the summer garden?

Zenun Çelaj: It was like a restaurant, but it had a garden. It was a restaurant, especially during the summer, not especially during the summer, but it worked mostly in summer, there were singers, they came from Serbia because back then there were no Albanians, they didn't sing in restaurants (laughs).

Aurela Kadriu: Where did you live the first year you came here for school?

Zenun Çelaj: I started, firstly in was in a *han*.⁷ Do you know where Bajram Kelmendi Street is?

Aurela Kadriu: Yes, yes.

Zenun Çelaj: I think at that crossroad...

Aurela Kadriu: Where the mosque is?

Zenun Çelaj: No, further up, further up, very near Bajram Kelmendi's house, if you know where it is. The road that stops the street that passed by Vellushe, in that area. Now that street connects the park with the school, where *Rilindja* used to be, at the museum...

Aurela Kadriu: At Sami Frashëri?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, also Sami Frashëri but also the elementary school...

Aurela Kadriu: Elena Gjika?

Zenun Çelaj: Elena Gjika. So that crossroad, in the street upwards on the right there was a *han*. I slept there only in plans for years until I got the opportunity to move elsewhere. It was cheap, that's why...

Aurela Kadriu: What was it called?

Zenun Çelaj: {Shrugs} I don't know, we just called it *han*, I don't know (laughs). Now something else was built there, I don't what, on the corner. And then I found a place with a student of *Shkolla Normale*, two, they were from Millosheva, I forgot their names. Unfortunately it has been many years (laughs). Do you know where the Serbian church is? On the road to Gërmia?

Aurela Kadriu: Yes.

⁷ Building near the road or in cities that served as a guest house for travelers, which also had room for their animals.

Zenun Çelaj: Where a gas station is, at the Chinese quarters as we used to call it, there's a bakery on the corner...

Aurela Kadriu: Yes, yes, yes.

Zenun Çelaj: Now, behind that, there's a building. There was a huge window and the landlord, a man from Prishtina, he wouldn't let us in through the front door, but we had to get in through the window to sleep there (laughs). It was covered in hay, with a blanket over it, and the pillows were also made out of hay and we slept there. Then we would come out of the windows, and we would close them and so on. In the meantime I got accepted in the dormitory, after, not long, a month or so. I was accepted thanks to Hasan Mekuli. He was a professor in *Shkolla Normale* and his authority had an effect.

Aurela Kadriu: What kind of neighborhood was this one in front of the Chinese quarters that you're talking about?

Zenun Çelaj: Now, when you go upward after the Chinese quarters, you turn right at the nursing home, in front of it, there's that bakery I mentioned, I don't know what it's called, Saranda I think...

Aurela Kadriu: Saranda.

Zenun Çelaj: I don't know the name. Behind that bakery was this building. It's there even now, it's old.

Aurela Kadriu: What was it like back then because those are a few of the first buildings in the city.

Zenun Çelaj: Now look, those buildings used to be called the first block, there is also a kindergarten there on the right. I'm always talking if we're going upwards. It was the first block... there were more intellectual people, there were many Serbians because they took the apartments in Prishtina that were built by the state. I don't know what the neighborhood was called. I know Serbians lived on the left, later as a journalist I lived there. Now it's Meridian or I don't know, a building covered in glass. Where the bus stop is. That street was very narrow, up to Gërmi. The road was cobbled up to *Normale* with stones, and it was narrow. Two cars couldn't pass by there, there was no space.

Aurela Kadriu: Was there... I mean, for you, as people who came from other cities, did you go out to the city?

Zenun Çelaj: Back then in the dormitory there was... it was like a military regime. You couldn't go out to the city anytime you wanted. You could go out one a week. One a week. We were allowed to go out once a week. On Sundays, because Saturday was a school day. But in the evenings a group of students would rarely be allowed to go to the movies, lists were made. Or... they would give us permission to go out in the city, a group of people, seven-eight students at a particular time. We could stay out until 10:00 at the latest, we weren't allowed to stay out later than that.

Aurela Kadriu: Did you go to the cinema?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, I went at that time... I wore shoes for the first time in Prizren (laughs). Shoes... I've told my friends and now they laugh and make fun of me over this. When I went to buy shoes... because I got the scholarship for the first time, I had taken a lot of money since I needed to pay for the dormitory in Prizren.

I went to the market where they were selling used things, I saw a pair of shoes that seemed in better condition to me. The old man who was selling them to me swore that only an old man had worn them, no one else, to show that they were in a good condition, Now, when I came to Prishtina, not that year, but the next year, for the first time we went to buy new shoes, they were very expensive...

Aurela Kadriu: New.

Zenun Çelaj: Yes new, but also buying them in the shop was much more expensive than having them made at saddlers. There was Gojan, he was killed on June 12, Serbians killed him in his own house. His house was behind the restaurant Rugova, there's a house there, Pjata, the restaurant, the owner of that restaurant. He had his own saddler shop, and I got them there. Narrow toe shoes were in, my feet were wide like a bear, like a monkey.

I wore them to show off. I walked from *Normale* to here, when we got into the cinema, I was with my friends, I took them off because they were too narrow. Cinema Rinia, it's in front of here, it isn't far from here. I took them off, but I couldn't wear them after. It was winter, it was around January or February. So, I walked from here to *Normale* with socks on ice (laughs).

Aurela Kadriu: What kind of movies did you watch, do you remember?

Zenun Çelaj: No, I forgot. We mostly watched cowboy movies at that time. I don't remember which one it was. I thought you said that it sounds like a movie because when I told my children these events, I wanted to tell them to learn because life isn't easy, they said, "Father, are you telling us a movie?" (laughs)

Aurela Kadriu: A very interesting story. I wanted to talk about the environment in the school more. Now, you have experienced *Normle* in all its forms...

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, that's true.

Aurela Kadriu: What was *Normale* like in Prishtina?

Zenun Çelaj: The building of *Normale*, I don't know if you know, it was built in '47, '48 as far as I know and read, it was supposed to be a center where agents that were to be sent to Albania would be

trained, UDB⁸ at that time. Then, in the meantime, politics changed and there was no need to send agents there, or children, so what they did was they turned it into a school, *Shkolla Normale*.

So a part of that facility, because it's a big facility, the one now doesn't have an additional part, except where AUK [American University in Kosovo] is. That part was the dormitory, the other part was the school, the classes. And behind that, the one that is in the middle of them was the canteen where we ate, behind, there are two small facilities behind, I don't know if you've seen them, teachers and director stayed there.

In the dormitory where the students stayed the rooms were big. I don't know how they are now, that it has become a university. But then, for example, in one room stayed around 30 students. There were military bunkbeds. The bathrooms had water taps to wash our faces and so on. While the showers were in the bathroom where we took showers in an organized way. Students of the year... this happened later because in the beginning we used to bathe in the *hamam*⁹ that isn't used now. They began to reconstruct it, but it isn't being reconstructed.

Aurela Kadriu: Really?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes. We used to come from there in a row, 20-30 people, we bathed and came to *Normale* during summer and winter (laughs).

Aurela Kadriu: What was the hamam like? It seems very interesting to me. I've never... I still haven't met anyone who bathed in a *hamam*.

Zenun Çelaj: Yes. It was... There was a round part, the water came from the taps up there. One part was for men, the other for women. They would turn on the water, you had no control. The men who turned it on would yell, "I'll turn on the water now, be careful because it's cold at first." And so on (laughs). Then they made that because it was troublesome... we were 400-500 people, and only 20-30 people could bathe in the *hamam*. So they made those showers in the basement.

Aurela Kadriu: Wow, so interesting. What was the classroom like?

Zenun Çelaj: The classrooms, most of the students were men. In my generation there were five years of school, I came in the third year. I came sometime around March '57. There were around six-seven girls. Now I can't count them, but there were around 35-36 people in the classroom. There were classrooms which didn't have girls at all. In my classroom, there were more, there were around six-seven girls, no more.

Aurela Kadriu: Did you think about getting into journalism while you were in *Normale*?

⁸ *Uprava državne bezbednosti* (State Security Administration).

⁹ Turkish bath.

Zenun Çelaj: No, I didn't even dream of becoming a journalist. All... my dream was to become a teacher, I even remember who came, Musa Murtezai was the deputy editor-in-chief at *Rilindja* at that time. Later he was the editor-in-chief of the first Albanian television. Later he was Fadil Hoxha's chief of staff in Belgrade.

He had come to *Normale*, not just to *Normale*, but to all high schools in Kosova and talked to Albanian language teachers. They would tell him if they had any talented kids in class, prove it with essays and that's it. I was proposed by my teacher, Demush Shala...

Aurela Kadriu: Sorry to interrupt you, you started to work at *Rilindja* before you started to study journalism?

Zenun Çelaj: I never studied journalism, I studied Albanology.

Aurela Kadriu: Ah, the other day you mentioned you studied...

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, before I started studying. Before even graduating from *Normale*, a month before I had to take the graduation exam as it was called at that time. Now I don't think there is such a thing...

Aurela Kadriu: There is.

Zenun Çelaj: Is there? I know once they stopped doing that. Or twice?

Aurela Kadriu: Yes.

Zenun Çelaj: No, back then, we had six or seven exams. We had written and oral exams in front of a commission which didn't come from the school. It came from, there wasn't a ministry back then, but from the Secretariat of Education. And, so he came and called us. Now we were learning for the graduation exam, they called us in for tutoring, back then we called these famous trainings, tutoring. In *Rilindja* that is in front of the museum, the road that separates them, it was a court for a while, now it's the Ministry of Diaspora, on the right side...

Aurela Kadriu: In the '60s?

Zenun Çelaj: '60s. They held the classes there and after it was done they said, "We will let you know who got accepted and who didn't." We had written and oral exams after those lectures. I got a letter to *Shkolla Normale*, "You have been accepted, but you have to write a request letter." I didn't think I could be a journalist because I idolized that profession.

With Nehat Islami, I don't know if you know him? He was in gymnasium, but even though he was younger than me, he wrote in elementary school and then in gymnasium. He was hired to prepare the children's pages in *Rilindja*, the daily one. So he was very comfortable there even though he was a kid.

And he said, “Do you know you got accepted?” I said, “Yes, but I will not write the request.” He said, “Why not?” “I’m not made for that job.”

He had made the request in my name. So I didn’t even write the request to become a journalist. And I got the invitation, “You’re accepted.” So I accepted it. It was my duty and in the meantime I got a scholarship to go... at that time whoever got scholarships in the Secretariat, I’ll say the Ministry of Education, even though it wasn’t called so. They sent you work wherever they could, not wherever you wanted.

They had appointed me to go to Brodosan near Dragash to become a teacher, since that’s what I was studying. The late Asllan Fazlija, an amazing man, editor-in-chief at *Rilindja*. He called me, “Çuni!” That’s how they used to call me, “What obligations do you have?” I said, “I have to go because I got the call.” Because I got the call to go to that service. He said, “Don’t go, I’ll take care of it.” I don’t know what he did, I never got another call.

Aurela Kadriu: Did you want to become a teacher?

Zenun Çelaj: I was stuck. I wanted to become a teacher but then I started thinking about journalism. Of course it was more attractive, in the city, the salary was four times better than the teacher’s. As a journalist, my salary was four times higher than the teacher who suggested that I be a journalist. When he asked me, Demush Shala, he said, “Zenun, how much do you get paid?” I knew how much he got paid, I said, “I am embarrassed to tell you.” “Why?” “I don’t want to tell you.” I told him, he was surprised. In the meantime he also came to work there (laughs).

Aurela Kadriu: How did you start? Did you immediately start as a journalist?

Zenun Çelaj: As a journalist. *Rilindja* had its own work system and way of recruiting journalists, it was an institution. I say this, not only because I worked there all those years, but *Rilindja* was like that indeed. At first, they would send you to the marketplace... the report was on the prices today in the Prishtina market, how much are the onions, potatoes, this and that.

Then to report on accidents, where the accident happened, where the other, this happened here, this and that happened. Then, covered trial sessions. They were simple reports, at the time the journalists were not allowed or the newspaper to write commentary or editorials. But it seems I proved to be successful quite fast, because I was working hard to compensate for the fact I never gave a serious thought to journalism. I covered political events, but only those I was interested in, not anything else.

In journalism, there is a saying, “Journalists should know a bit of everything” and then someone else added, “The journalist is an ignorant... a multidimensional ignorant”. So, he knows a bit of everything, but nothing in depth. (laughs). Yes.

Aurela Kadriu: What were the first visits on the field like? You were still new to Prishtina and you visited the market...

Zenun Çelaj: I don't know how useful these are to you but I will narrate everything as for myself. For two years at that time, journalists weren't allowed to go much into the field, especially not alone, beginners weren't allowed to sign their full names. You could only put your last name if it was a topic that you wrote well. To be put on the first pages of the newspaper, you had to get four-five years experience as a journalist. This is how it was. In the beginning, we went with a journalist who was more experienced so they could see how you worked and eventually find another topic.

Aurela Kadriu: Let's continue talking about when you went with more experienced journalists.

Zenun Çelaj: Yes. There was Mustafë Rushiti, he now went to America... he followed up with the Assembly of Kosovo at that time, with the socio-political organizations, as we used to call them. So, the Communist Association, Socialist Association. These usually were appointed to more experienced, more trained journalists. And I often had to go with them. One day, it was summer, maybe in '63, when we entered the Assembly, people had gone on their breaks, and Mustafa was devious. Even though he was, as we said then, he was in line, he was very devious.

Aurela Kadriu: Excuse me, what does in line mean?

Zenun Çelaj: From the party line. He respected the party line (laughs). And we went from one office to the other, he knew who was in which office, he opened the offices to find material somewhere so he could write about it. And... but I didn't find anything, I came back to the office. The editor, "Do you have anything to write?" "I don't," I said, "I will go to the swimming pool." There was a swimming pool on the way to Llukar. You know where Medresa is, it was there toward the end of the village. It was the only swimming pool in the city.

I was hanging out there, shortly, I went there to swim and tan. And Abdyl Bunjkau was there, a journalist at *Zani i Rinisë*, the only one who got paid at *Zani i Rinisë*, because he was very funny and he used to make caricatures for *Rilindja*, his section was called *Anza [Wasp]*. He said, "Zenun, why are you here?" "Why Esat, what happened?" Now, jokingly I said, "I came to see if someone will drown so I can find something to write because I didn't find a topic."

On Sunday that section was published in *Rilindja*, he had drawn the poor and me... well my caricature, "Why did you come?" "I came to see if someone will drown so I can write some news for the newspaper." (laughs)

Aurela Kadriu: Do you have this caricature?

Zenun Çelaj: I didn't save it. Back then, as I said, I didn't know how to save anything, but it would be found, it's in the newspaper somewhere.

Aurela Kadriu: In '61?

Zenun Çelaj: In '63, or it could be in '62. But I mean, it's the beginning years.

Aurela Kadriu: Did you then profile as a journalist in any particular sector? How did it go?

Zenun Çelaj: Well, as I said, there was a system back then. Then they appointed me to follow up with social and political organizations at the municipality level. And again I think I was successful because I worked really hard since I didn't believe in myself because I hadn't thought of doing this before. And then they appointed me to big events. I remember once, one of the events I remember. Fadil Hoxha was going, I forgot which one, I think July 9 was considered the day of Kosovo's uprising. It wasn't another day because July 7 was for Serbia, July 13 for Montenegro... I forgot the others, thank God the time to not remember them came.

And they told me to go and follow up with Fadil Hoxha in Carralevë. They say that the first rifle was shot in Carralevë and Fadil Hoxha got in front of a Italian patrol, he killed them, there used to be a memorial. I went there, they asked me to take pictures. I had a camera, it was simple, but the editorial office gave me a Flexaret.¹⁰ It was like a box like this {shows with his hands}, you had to look up so the object you wanted to photograph would be reflected. A photograph that has circulated for years, Fadil Hoxha speaking in front of people and the memorial. I mean, in that report, it was the main report which I was proud of. Doors opened there, a better perspective.

Aurela Kadriu: How... Later I would like you to tell me when the *Rilindja* offices moved to the city.

Zenun Çelaj: Before coming to *Rilindja*, before I started learning...

Aurela Kadriu: Before coming to the Press Palace.

Zenun Çelaj: No, as I said, here was...

Aurela Kadriu: Before you came to *Rilindja*.

Zenun Çelaj: Okay. The editorial office of *Rilindja* moved around, when it came from Prizren, because it first started in Prizren, in '45 it moved to Prishtina. Provincial institutions brought *Rilindja* and the Radio of Prishtina at that time. *Rilindja* initially... as they told me and as it is written in its history, now it's the parking lot in front of the Assembly, facing the museum. There's a huge parking lot there, the houses were torn down, you don't remember... do you remember the shops, the buildings near the street?

Aurela Kadriu: Yes, they're still there.

Zenun Çelaj: No, they were near the street. There were buildings, unfortunately they were torn down because back then there was an architecture of Turkish towns, the older ones aren't anywhere. It was

¹⁰ A brand of cameras.

there, then it was in the street that was *korzo*, that took you to the old post office, the summer garden was there, and in the meantime it got bigger, two or three offices weren't enough and they moved to that building, the one that used to be a prison. It was a prison during great Albania time, they moved there. It was an old building, luckily it hasn't changed. They changed the facade, it is more beautiful now, they painted it, but not the architecture, it hasn't changed. It has changed inside...

Aurela Kadriu: Is it, sorry to interrupt, is it the building with a lot of glass?

Zenun Çelaj: No, it doesn't have glass. It only has some windows like...

Aurela Kadriu: Curved?

Zenun Çelaj: You know where the museum is...

Aurela Kadriu: I know exactly where you mean, but there are a few buildings in a row there. I want to know, is it one with big windows?

Zenun Çelaj: In the beginning of the street, a low-rise building. It was built more recently, it doesn't belong to that area. Just a little while before we moved from *Rilindja*, there was, rotation, that's what the machinery where the newspaper was made was called... while that building is further up, it has an old architecture and it would be a miracle if someone could stop construction of other buildings where this is, the parking lot, but to be turned into a park so the building behind would be seen. It's the Agency of Statistics, or I don't know what it is now.

Aurela Kadriu: Yes, the Agency of Statistics is very near the museum, they're in front of each other.

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, this is it.

Aurela Kadriu: I think it's a heritage protection agency or something...

Zenun Çelaj: Here I've seen that it says the Ministry of Diaspora, I didn't go in... at some point it was the Minor Offenses Court.

Aurela Kadriu: Yes, yes. After you started working did you move anymore?

Zenun Çelaj: No, we didn't move from there until we moved to the Press Palace.

Aurela Kadriu: Do you remember it? Because probably while you were in *Rilindja* you discussed that you're moving.

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, we knew. Even the Palace has a history. In several places, its foundations were laid, but only the foundations, but never constructed. One of them was here where the Boxing Club is, near the tunnel, behind it, Flora Brovina has some offices there...

Aurela Kadriu: It was the Mother Teresa Association, now it is called Tophane.

Zenun Çelaj: No, Tophane is way down, this is a bit up. I don't know if you recall the library that used to be there, Hivzi Sylejmani Library, a bit on the side...

Aurela Kadriu: Closer to the street.

Zenun Çelaj: Closer, but no, you enter a yard and there was an old building. It's been a while since I was there, to tell you the truth, since the war I did not go. There we laid the foundations of *Rilindja* first, Fadil Hoxha laid them but it was never built. Then it was laid behind the stadium, not quite behind, but more to... at the flower post, and there too was not built. There they laid the foundations where Grand Hotel is today, and always Fadil Hoxha would do the ceremony.

So it's a interesting history. Imer Shkreli was a journalist at *Rilindja*, he would also write satirical texts. And he writes this satirical text about "The man with the foundational stones", and describes all this without mentioning the name of Fadil Hoxha. That became a political problem and he was expelled from the party because he ridiculed him (laughs). And now, after all this time, came Ismail Bajraj as the head of *Rilindja*, he died, and he was also very serious, but he managed to push the project. The investments were secured and construction of the Media Palace started, perhaps in the '70s, '71. The data exist, but I can't remember right now. It was completed in four-five years.

The editorial office moved there before because the Press Palace started construction later and there were underground waters, then until they fixed the interior. There were dilemmas to separate... I don't know if you've ever been in that building?

Aurela Kadriu: Yes, I was.

Zenun Çelaj: Everything was open except where the elevators were. So we knew it was getting built and where we would be. Of course we were happy because the conditions weren't good, small, dark rooms, because it used to be a prison, the rooms were really small and dark. Now we were moving to a very modern, very bright place. It had an air conditioner inside, there was no need to turn on anything for airing, it all went through the tubes and it would be distributed in the building.

Aurela Kadriu: Then when you moved to the building, the moment... was it divided in sections even then? So the culture journalists...

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, yes, yes. The inside organization... those divisions still exist, they're almost classic. Now, it was different but back then it was divided into domestic politics, foreign policy, economy, culture, sports, entertainment pages, children pages, pages for municipalities, capital page. So, these were the divisions, it was a unit, but there were divisions. There were foreign politics, domestic politics, culture, sport.

Aurela Kadriu: Do you remember the inauguration day? Was there an inauguration?

Zenun Çelaj: There wasn't.

Aurela Kadriu: You just started?

Zenun Çela: We just started. Actually we didn't start in the building, the Palace, we started in the building in front of it where TV 21 is, where the daily newspaper *Zëri* is. There's a restaurant downstairs, but it used to be bookshops, the whole ground floor. On the middle floor there were offices and we had *Rilindja's* clinic because there was huge staff, there were around two-three thousand employees. In the meantime other editorial offices came in the Palace, not Albanian, so, *Jedinstvo*, *Tan*, then *Zëri*, *Zani i Rinisë* wasn't part of *Rilindja* until much later, it was its own publishing house. *Fjala*, *Gazeta e Pionerit*, *Shkëndija*, *Bati*, and so on. In the meantime, they became part of *Rilindja*. It was called a journalistic publishing enterprise, these were in the frame of *Rilindja* as well. There was the bookshop network, there was the printing house and editorial office of the publication of non-school textbooks...

Part Four

Zenun Çelaj: It was its own publishing house. School textbooks but (inaudible min 0:06) artistic literature. We called it the editorial board.

Aurela Kadriu: I would want to... are you tired?

Zenun Çelaj: We can continue for a little bit more (laughs). If you're not tired.

Aurela Kadriu: No, no. I'm worried about you.

Zenun Çelaj: We can continue some more. So there's less next time (laughs)

Aurela Kadriu: I want to talk... before we interviewed you, it was very important... there are some important moments in the development of history... I don't know how to say, '68, '74, '81, '99, '90s. You were a journalist during all these periods, which is fascinating that...

Zenun Çelaj: We survived (laughs).

Aurela Kadriu: I wanted to talk about the year '68 today, how did it find you as a journalist, did you cover the news? The whole occurrence in '68?

Zenun Çelaj: Before '68, an important event in our history happened in '66. Maybe we were lucky, God didn't curse us historically (laughs). It seems according to all historical facts, a clash happened between the Yugoslav leadership, Tito with Serbian mainly, Croats, Slovenians, and Serbs. Serbs at

that time made up most of the population in Yugoslavia and Serbians were those who projected themselves in Yugoslavia, first as a kingdom and then as a federal state of that Yugoslavia.

There were more than 60 percent, how do I say, as a nation in the Yugoslav Federation. And in those services at their level they had Ranković, the second person in power in Yugoslavia. The second person in power immediately after Tito, and the first in the police and everything as in the hands of the police. State police. And they began to dismantle it, to demobilize it, not give them the opportunity.

At that time I was a soldier. The event took the name the Fourth Plenum of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. Brion is in Slovenia where Tito spent the better part of his life, a very luxurious place. I've seen it, it looks like a fairytale, you can't even imagine something more beautiful. He holds the plenum there and unmasks the case, they force Ranković to quit. One of the reasons to dismiss him and unmask UDB's politics was the maltreatment of Albanians. Not that Tito didn't know, or the others, but now it was convenient for him. And, among others the surplus meeting is mentioned, maybe you don't know what surplus is?

Aurela Kadriu: Yes, yes. I've read.

Zenun Çelaj: You read? The surplus, so immediately after the war they beat people up and it was a terrible poverty, then the gun action came along, then the eviction to Turkey, so forcing them to declare as Turks and then evicting them there. And so arguments that were very discrediting for a system that claimed that everyone is equal, that everyone should be happy, everyone is equal in education, in economics, in power and in fact it wasn't so. For example only around 2-3 percent of the policemen were Albanian. In the military, around five or six Albanians were officers, one or two in diplomacy, so, everywhere we were... I don't remember the expression, we weren't equal, shortly.

So, for me this was the event that changed our lives and we started talking about it. I was a soldier but after a month I came back here. Before I went to the military I had a huge problem with the UDB. They caught me, I was with Rexhep Zllatku, he was a Macedonian writer and journalist in *Flaka e Vllaznimit* [*Brotherhood Flame*]. He had come to cash in checks since in '62 the earthquake in Skopje happened and now they were giving money to those who were damaged, to help, but not cash, but in checks. With those checks they could buy construction material.

Now, some Albanians would come here, they would cash in the checks as if they bought construction material., but in fact they would take the money. It happened to be November 27, so November 28's eve. Božur had just opened, now it's called Swiss Diamond Hotel, because we're talking in between events (laughs). And I met him. I had done my work, because always on November 29 we published a festive edition of *Rilindja* for the Republic of Yugoslavia's day. It was AVNOJ's day [Anti-Fascist National Liberation Council of Yugoslavia].

I had gathered the material, I had done my tasks and everything, I met with Rexhep and another friend who was from Kumanova. "Let's go get something to drink in Božur." Around 11-12 o'clock they came,

a civilian, “Come out with us.” I didn’t know. “Who are you?” “Come on, don’t make us call the police to come get you.” I got up. At that time there were no illegal gangs like now.

I got out, there was a car with the police name and number, the police put me in, they beat me up all night. My body was all bruised. Their reason was that I celebrated November 23, Flag Day, they wanted me to confess. I didn’t. As much as I felt it with my soul and had it in my mind, I didn’t accept that I celebrated it. They let me go in the morning. And among others, “You are nationalists at *Rilindja*, this and that.”

The next day I went, Mehmet Shoshi was the director at that time, he was from Peja. I said, “I want to quit *Rilindja*.” I told him what had happened. And he... he was part of the party, he was the secretary of Peja’s area, which was a high function. He said, “You can’t quit, you have to stay. But sit down and write a complaint about what happened and send it to the Committee. Maybe nothing comes out of it but let it be as proof.” That’s what I did.

In the meantime, in ‘65, I went to the military. From the military... in the meantime Mehmet Shoshi had become Secretary of Internal Affairs of Kosovo, Minister of Internal Affairs of Kosovo. Because Ranković had fallen, do you understand? Now Albanians were getting positions. He was there and the first thing he did was submit my case to the Committee. The UDB inspector was fired, my case gets huge, my affirmation as a journalist. Now I could cover any events I wanted, I was a candidate for Kosovo’s youth president (laughs), on this basis. I didn’t win.

I mentioned this to show how Albanian’s affirmation started, I started and... universities opened. They had opened earlier, in ‘60. Since ‘60 the universities opened and that changed the mood, the national climate. In the meantime, how do I say, our eyes opened to the injustice that was done to us. And the students who started studying in Ljubljana, in Zagreb, in another horizon, another culture and politics, they got to a point where they couldn't stand the injustice anymore.

The ‘68 protests were organised. I was lucky to... so, I covered the events and debates and discussion about Ranković’s deformations, as we called them, over Albanian people, which were stories. If you see newspapers at that time you will get goosebumps. All kinds of torture, those stories, the people, they beat people up because when they plowed the ground of the their horses was red, the other black, and this symbolised the colors of the Albanian flag. This is one of the examples, how banal and tragic it was.

I mean that the youth were aware now, they had moved forward. They were organising a protest in ‘68. At the time when in Jajce, which is the place where Yugoslavia was born as it was called Tito’s federative. Statesmen from all over the world came here for the protest. Youth was asking for equality in Yugoslavia. It wasn’t a request to separate or to join Albania at that time, but for equality. Luckily I was aware of what was happening all the time. Because ever since I came to Prishtina, as I said the first time, that night I became friends with Ismail Dumoshi. He was from Prishtina. [He had] an extremely generous mother.

And especially for us who came from Montenegro, it was like a haven. We went there for whatever troubles we had. If we didn't have a place to live, if we didn't have food, we went there. So, then I was a journalist and I didn't need that kind of help but I just went for...

Aurela Kadriu: Fun.

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, like when you visit your mother. And the organizing group of the protest was there. Of course none of us had any idea, (laughs) if I can say so. And the whole plan in detail was designed in that house. Ismet's brother was the main organizer, his name was Osman. He has also died, younger than Ismail. But there were also Selatin Novosella, Mir Reka, who else was there, Muçolli, and many others. So, I knew how it was going to be, where will they gather, at the Philosophical Faculty, where later was the library.

I had invited a friend from Manastir in Macedonia who worked at the Archive of Manastir, so he would witness the event. So we covered the event from A to Z. Of course they didn't let us report on it, and I wasn't active, I was just an observer. I went the next day to *Rilindja*, I said, "If we need a report for the protest, I'll do it." They said, "No, we can only publish what *Tanjug* sends us, we have an order, not even one sentence." A statement from the committee and SUP¹¹ came, the police. So, as I said, I have continually followed up with that situation.

Aurela Kadriu: And there were absolutely no reports?

Zenun Çelaj: Only in the beginning, only... that there was a group of frustrated youngsters in Prishtina, as *Tanjug* had reported, a state agency, that they caused disorder, but they didn't even mention that there were thousands of people in that protest. It was interesting... but people communicated with each other. They went to schools and everywhere and told people the time of the protest. It was at 03:45 or 03:50 in the afternoon, I'm not sure.

And at 04:00 all streets, the boulevard that we now call Nënë Tereza, back then called Marshall Tito, filled with protesters who were coming from all city streets. At the same time there were also protests in other cities, Podujeva, Gjakova, Tetova, because back then we thought big (laughs).

Aurela Kadriu: Yes, let's start with '68, tell us about the continuity...

Zenun Çelaj: Yes.

Aurela Kadriu: Tell us about...

Zenun Çelaj: Correlate to it, yes.

¹¹ Secretariat of Internal Affairs in Yugoslavia's time.

Aurela Kadriu: Yes, tell us how you covered these events? You were part of censored events, you covered them.

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, yes. Are we starting?

Aurela Kadriu: Yes.

Zenun Çelaj: It was a completely unexpected event, it was also unusual for the time. '68 was the time of socialism of that rough communist dictatorship. Even in Kosovo a group of students who had come from, mainly from the universities of Croatia and Ljubljana, and Slovenia, where there was a different environment from the other parts of that Yugoslavia back then. Therefore, they were more liberal, closer to Western democracy. They started organizing demonstrations with which they demanded equality for Albanians and for Kosovo to be an equal unit with others, with other republics.

We were nowhere like that, we were an autonomy completely dependent on Serbia. And despite the fact that we were also, in terms of population, Albanians, we were more than, many times more than Montenegrins, more than Slovenians, more than Macedonians, we didn't have those rights. I had the privilege of being part of a family in Prishtina, Ismail Dumoshi, informed of his patriotic determination, to express myself even though such expressions bother me.

And, in his house, the preparations for the '68 protest were done. So I knew what was going to happen, how it was going to happen, where it was going to start, what the slogans were because I was also present during their conversations. Not as an organizer of what would happen. For this purpose I had informed a friend of mine from Manastir, Macedonia, whose name was Teko Tajipi, he worked at the city archive. Manastir is a very important city for the history of our Albanian culture. The ABC that we have today was born there.

He gladly came, of course also because of his passion for archives and history, he came. I know it would be so... there was also the slogan "Ten minutes to four" because... as metaphor that the last minutes had come, the call went to school because those were the people who, the crowd of protestors were mostly students. My friend... I lived in Ulpiana near the hospital, while they were going to start from the yard of the Philosophy Faculty, back then we called the Philology Faculty, and went towards the center.

Back then the boulevard Nënë Tereza was called Marshall Tito Street, as all main streets of cities of Yugoslavia were called. The protest was going to happen in front of the National Theater, back then it was called the People's Theater. And of course it had to move, come with requests in front of the Provincial Committee, now the Ministry of Culture. This was meaningful because the Committee and the Party were the power back then. Nothing would happen without the approval of the committee.

And we left, but we noticed we were going to be late, we met a friend who worked at the Albanological Institute at that time, Rrustem Berisha, he had a car, there were Zastava Fićo small cars at that time, made by Fiat. We stopped him and told him what was happening. He turned back immediately but

when we got to where Radio Prishtina is now, back then Radio Kosova, actually now it's Radio Prishtina, the crowd had grown and we couldn't move.

He went back, we got together with the crowd who were marching towards the center. It was, how do I say it, the flow of the people from all directions, all over the streets, what is that saying, they all took you to the city center. Because the messengers also went to schools, the call for protest, they would just open the classroom door and say, "Ten minutes to four..." It was known that it would start at 04:00, but the idea was that people should be at the Marshall Tito street at 04:00.

And so it happened, the roads were filled. The police were also surprised. Surprisingly, the news didn't get out, even though the call for the protest was done so openly, almost publicly, they didn't mobilize to prevent it, because of course they would have prevented it. It was November 28, so the eve of November 29, a holiday that was then widely celebrated in Yugoslavia as the main holiday, it was the day of the founding of the Yugoslav Socialist Federation, which took place in Jajce, Bosnia. Tito was also there, friends of Yugoslavia at that time had come from all over the world and were celebrating when a protest broke out here, which was then considered and treated as hostile, as a protest for the destruction of Yugoslavia, for the violation of territorial integrity.

And, the organizations were prepared, I know, since I was... I just listened, not part of the organization. They were prepared to sacrifice. However, Tito was a very pragmatic man, very smart, and when the news got there later, we understood what happened and we declared it, it wasn't a serious thing, a group of young Albanians in Kosovo have organized a protest, made some reasonable demands and that the government will treat them in the meantime. So it went unnoticed, not with many consequences.

In fact, the organizers were arrested and sentenced to five, six, three, three and four years, not with the sentences that Albanians were usually sentenced with. I forgot the exact number but it was a number of them. But, it is interesting, in the meantime it actually happened that some of the demands announced in that protest were even met. There was no interest about the main thing, the Republic of Kosovo, but it was realized that Kosovo has a constitution. Until then, there was a statute, which didn't, even as a name, didn't reflect an equal treatment for Kosovo and Albanians with other Slavic republics and we were mainly Albanians.

Aurela Kadriu: What was it called before...

Zenun Çelaj: Statute of the Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo. And now the constitution was demanded and in the meantime changes were made to the Constitution of Yugoslavia. It's called, it's the phase of its amendment in which changes were made and Kosovo really got some progressivism at the federation level. It was now represented in... was one, the chamber in the Assembly of Yugoslavia, the parliament then, was the Chamber of Republics. The Chamber of Republics was created and it was called the provinces.

I don't remember the exact number, I think that while the republics had 15 representatives in that chamber, that was the Chamber that decided, stamped the decisions of the Yugoslav Parliament at that time, Kosovo had ten. That is, two-thirds of that content. Then it had the member, the representative in the Yugoslav presidency and in the party leadership. There were two very important forums which practically dictated the policies in the then-Federation of Yugoslavia.

Now Kosovo wasn't represented as other republics in that chamber but while they had two representatives in the presidency, Kosovo had one. He also had a member in the Party and it was his turn to once again lead, to be the president of Yugoslavia. Of course, as long as Tito was alive, he was the eternal president, even though he was proclaimed the eternal president, but after his death, it happened that an Albanian was the chairman of the presidency, who happened to be Fadil Hoxha, if I'm not wrong. Then the University of Kosovo was established because until then we didn't even have a university in Kosovo. There were faculties, the Faculty of Philology and Philosophy was created, it was called that. It included branches that trained staff, so, high school teachers. There was law and economics. It had a high school faculty, arts, so, painting, and in the meantime, it was transformed into, it was a high school and it was transformed into a faculty.

And after that, from this the university was created, the Faculty of Medicine was opened, the Academy of Sciences and Arts, the Albanological Institute was created. That is to say, paths were opened that really advanced the constitutional, political and social position of Kosovo with others, so, it achieved some effects. Meanwhile, paths were opened for cooperation with Albania, which until then was forbidden fruit to listen to Radio Tirana and watch Albanian television. Now, in the meantime, after a year, not immediately after the protests, they started happening in '71, '72. However, with the constitution of '74, it practically approached the same status as other republics.

Aurela Kadriu: I would want, just a question, when you came back from the protest that you wanted to report in the newspaper about it, what happened?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes. Now, after all that night, which was very dramatic, however, the police intervened, and the fire brigade brought water cannons to disperse the protest. Because it was no longer just a protest of the students, the youth was joined by people. There were all people, there are some events, interesting scenes. It was, maybe it was a Friday, I forgot the day, but I think it was a Friday but even if it wasn't a Friday, it was the time when religious people entered the mosques to pray, the evening prayer or something like that.

I know the protesters entered the mosques and called on those who were praying to join the youngsters. They had come out too. Speeches were held in front of the now National Theater then the People's Theater. I remember that the Committee had been brought there, the Committee as I said, it was the power and the party, it was everything. They had called on the most authoritative professors to call on the students to disperse because, according to logic and according to their analysis, these protests could damage the issue, the interest of the Albanians that had begun to develop, to move forward.

Because everything was happening after the fall of Ranković, two years after. Among them was Mark Krasniqi, I remember, Dervish Rozhaja, there were, I don't remember all the others. But, I remember that, among them, among others who spoke, there was Ismail Bala who was a member of the presidency of the Provincial Committee and he talked about the achievements, the perspective, the progress of the Albanians, which had a real basis because after the Second World War, the position of the Albanians had really changed.

Part Five

Zenun Çelaj: By the time of Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav kingdom. Osman Dumoshi, who was undoubtedly the main organizer of the protest, stayed close, the protesters didn't have a megaphone, they didn't have the means to command, to give effective speeches. Whereas, those of the party, they had taken... of course, from the police or who knows. I remember that it was funny, he approached him and said, "Come on, you talked a lot and said nothing, give it to me." He even took it and delivered his long speech...

Aurela Kadriu: Do you remember what he said?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes. It was this demand that we were oppressed, we didn't have rights, we were violated. Although these are some facts that I mentioned, even though we were more people than Macedonians, Slovenian, than...

Aurela Kadriu: Croats.

Zenun Çelaj: No, Croats were second. That Bosnians, for example. We were more in number. We didn't have rights, we wanted a university, we wanted a constitution, we wanted a republic. All the international rights belonged to us, and so... then they arrested, both Osmani and those who gave speeches. They took the organizers and sentenced them, but not with horrible sentences as I said. I said, as they used to, previously sentence people for 15 years for no reason.

Aurela Kadriu: You said that these ideas for freedom came mostly from students who studied in Croatia and Slovenia. I am interested, you were a journalist, your personal experiences. In Kosovo, was there an acceptance of the situation because they didn't know there was better? They had to come from Croatia and Slovenia to tell them it wasn't good.

Zenun Çelaj: I didn't answer your first question about how I reported. Actually, when I came back, after the whole event, it lasted until somewhere after 12:00-01:00 at night when everyone was dispersed. I went to the newsroom, then the newspaper was printed by the means of that time. It was quite primitive compared to today, the arrangement of lead letters, with old machinery, in a machine that would rotate, it was taken from Germany during the war.

So, the newspaper would come out late during the morning of the day. I went and said, “I, if a report is needed, I have covered it.” Of course, I didn’t dare say that I knew it was going to happen, I would also be in danger of being arrested. I said, “I’m ready to write the report.” And the editor who was in charge told me, “No, there is no need, the Committee told us that they will send a press release and we will not receive any...”, there should be no writing other than what the Committee itself sends or what they will conveyed through the official telegraph agency of Yugoslavia, which still exists today, but today it is in Serbia as a news agency.

So it happened, the news was very vague, without the dimensions it had, without the full content, “In Pristina, there was a protest organized by the youth. It went peacefully, there were no consequences, there were no arrests.” It was, I mean, how to say, with the intention of calming and minimizing all that had happened. Later, in the following days, it came to reflect in the dimension that the event really had.

Now, you asked me...

Aurela Kadriu: I’ll remind you of the question. You said earlier, in the beginning of the sentence, that some students who came from Croatia and Slovenia were the initiators of the ‘68 protest. I immediately thought of a question, was there any acceptance of the situation in Kosovo? Because the people who were in Kosovo didn’t know that there was better and they had to come up with ideas for freedom?

Zenun Çelaj: No. The ideas existed and they were lived. Groups, whole young and intellectual groups over the years suffered for decades in prisons as organized groups to change the situation, to protest, to create, as they said, a different opinion of Albanians. Of course, fear had entered the souls of the people and they didn’t have all that courage. And these, I said, who came from, who had studied in Ljubljana and Zagreb, brought this spirit of courage to organize the protest.

Now, it should be mentioned that it was a student movement of youth all over Europe. Meanwhile, student protests took place in both Belgrade and Zagreb. In Germany, those youth and student protests are known, in France, in the Czech Republic, in... many European countries. It was the demands of the generation to change the situation. They demanded freedom, they demanded democracy, more freedom, more participation in life and better conditions, work, and so on. I mean, they came and had the courage to get into this business.

Aurela Kadriu: And for you, so, the personal experience you had at the newspaper with your colleagues. How did you experience this event?

Zenun Çelaj: Now, in all the staff at that time, there were people who were very, as we were called them then, *regjimli*.¹² People who were in line of power, of the party and of the personalities who have led, and it was known who they were. They could even have also been state security collaborators at

¹²

the time. And we knew how to beware of them. But at *Rilindja*, almost 90 percent of us didn't hide their enthusiasm. And not only at *Rilindja* but people in general, on the streets, in schools, everywhere, for what was happening.

People vented for the first time. It was, immediately after the war, of World War Two, they expressed in a more open and dangerous way what they had in their souls. So, there was a fear of certain individuals that you couldn't expose yourself fully. But, you also had the rest with whom you communicated freely and you expressed your feelings, emotions without any worries.

Aurela Kadriu: What about '74? You mentioned the day we met that you have the typewriter on which the declaration of '74 was written?

Zenun Çelaj: Not '74. It was later.

Aurela Kadriu: Ah later...

Zenun Çelaj: '89, '90 Kosovo Constitutional Declaration.

Aurela Kadriu: Ah, I misunderstood. We'll talk about that later. I'm interested to know how this wave of institutional changes found you? Especially '74, how did the constitution declaration in '74 find you? How do you personally remember it?

Zenun Çelaj: Now, Kosovo, now after that demonstration, after the formation of the University, the composition and the intellectual elite was completely different. Now both professors and former students who had studied in other educational centers had come. Zagreb and Ljubljana have always brought a more democratic spirit for us. But, even in Belgrade, there was, how do I say, a deeper knowledge obtained than we did.

Even the people had learned, the intellectuals in these centers about history, about ... research the archives, without, because it is not only what we didn't learn in our school, which lacked texts, staff. For example, in high school, my teacher taught me both history and the Albanian language. Of course, a teacher who had studied in Albania, there was no other educated cadre.

I mean, another phase began, with more knowledge, and it was no longer quite easy to limit, to curb the generation's demands for affirmation, for change, to be equal with others and not to be despised. Until then, Serbians didn't even call us Albanians, they called *shqipari*¹³ which was a, a, how do I say, an epithet...

¹³ People who were in line of power, of the party and of the personalities who have led and it was known who they were.

Aurela Kadriu: You said they called you *Šiptar*?¹⁴

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, yes. Esat Mekuli has an interesting poem published in Serbian and Albanian.

Aurela Kadriu: What does he say?

Zenun Çelaj: Don't call me *Šiptar*, with this work, so, this attribute. They included primitive people, with saws on their arms, slipping wood on the streets of Belgrade with others who were beggars, so, very contemptuous. And now, they could no longer call us that. With the changes came with the '74 constitution. We were allowed to use the national flag. Now they imposed a sign that would distinguish it from the flag used in Albania, so as not to nurture the feelings of a Kosovo-Albania union, to make a difference supposedly.

Because we are Albanians, they are... that's what they called us. In fact, the press, which was Belgrade nationalist, called them, "*Albanci* us Albanians". Even the Albanian language. They didn't want to allow their language to be called the same, so it was *albanci* for them, and *shiptarci* for us. I mean, they wanted to make differences so we wouldn't have those goals, we are two different countries. They continue with that medieval dream.

Aurela Kadriu: How did you write at *Rilindja*? Was there any... you mentioned dialect now, when you read old copies of *Rilindja*, the language is totally different.

Zenun Çelaj: It was. Until '68, until 1968, we also wrote textbooks, all of which were written in the Gheg dialect. A dialect very close to the standard one day but not unified. And in '68, before the unification of the Albanian orthography, before it was codified in Albanian spaces, we approved it here in '68, while the codification took place in '72, the Congress of Orthography as it is called in Tirana. I mean, until then, we had two dialects. The one we used... but also in Albania, in various publications, both the Gheg dialect and the Tosk dialect were used. So, after that congress, the standard Albanian language was unified.

Aurela Kadriu: But was there a tendency from the government, because you mentioned that they also wanted, how do I say it, to differentiate the language. Were there tendencies to push you to write in Gheg, to not write in standard language?

Zenun Çelaj: No. It's interesting because now, among some... so to say... exists the opinion that all of those functionaries, politicians who lived and worked during socialism were anti-Albanian, pro-Serbian. But it isn't true. When the standard concept of the Albanian language came out, it was published in Albania in '68. Here, the then-Secretariat for Education and Culture, that was the name of the ministry that dealt with this field. They brought it here and objectively organized the meeting.

¹⁴ The Serbian word for Albanian is *Albanci* or *Albanac*. In an attempt to distinguish between Albanians from Albania proper and those in Kosovo, they used *Šiptar*, stemming from the Albanian word for Albanians, *Shqiptar*, for Kosovo Albanians. The word is considered derogatory by Albanians.

It wasn't called that here, but it was called the language conference in which all Albanian intellectuals gathered, linguists, and we agreed that we're starting to use the standard language from this day and on, before it started in Albania. There was an attempt to criminalize again, to criminalize this conference as a political act. Even Fadil Hoxha, who was then chairman of the presidency here. The organizer... because the Albanological Institute, which was just founded, organized this conference to shut the mouths of others. Then the political authorities were very powerful.

He called them, welcomed them, and congratulated Fehmi Agani, who was the director of the Albanological Institute, for this success, for this important effect for culture, for language, for... so, he objectively stopped any attempt to arrest anyone or take any political measure against them.

Aurela Kadriu: What year did *Rilindja* move to the building where the Government is now?

Zenun Çelaj: We went there in '76, I think.

Aurela Kadriu: What was it like?

Zenun Çelaj: It was, we were in the old building, as I told you, a building that was once a prison. It reminded us of dark times because even the spaces, doors and windows were also with bars. In the yard there was a space where prisons usually go out...

Aurela Kadriu: Some kind of prison of censorship.

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, it also had a way. There was no censorship as today is imagined, for censors to come like in some socialist countries

Aurela Kadriu: But it was infiltrated in the system.

Zenun Çelaj: Look, that was known. The Provincial Committee held meetings, said, "These are the directions in which society should move, economic development, agriculture, not education, brotherhood unity." And now, these were the frames that everyone created censorship in their own head because everyone was careful not to let something happen to them. At some point they had, how do I say, they launched, self-censorship is worse than external censorship. So, we had self-censorship, we knew how far we could go. I said, the prison had an arch like this {shows with his hands} that they... a yard between buildings, it is an arch. Even if you saw it today it looks the same... they want to turn the prison into a museum that is in the building...

Aurela Kadriu: Of SUP.

Zenun Çelaj: SUP, yes (laughs), from Serbian language. Where the police are, then in the middle there is an arched courtyard where the prisoners are usually taken out to move and get fresh air for half an hour so that they wouldn't suffer, staying only inside, because they would degenerate. The printing

house was there, there were also those machines that some had brought from Albania at the time when there were good Yugoslavia-Albania relations, because we didn't have them here.

Later they were modernized, of course. Now, the conditions, the small rooms, which were, as I told you, with bars and very narrow and dark. Now, we were going to a palace, a modern building where the entire floor was a space without walls, only some paravanes, how we used to call them, and we could communicate with one another or when we stood up, we could see one another, it had air conditioners on all floors. In the summer, it was fresh, in the winter, it was warm. .

To go to a floor and the palace had 17-18, you took the elevator. It was entirely something else. They brought machines that were already computerized to the printing house. It was entirely something else, much more modern. Even at some point we were much more modern because out of nothing we had to build something. We had a more modern printing house than even Belgrade or Sarajevo itself, because we were supplied by the Slovenians, from there, we bought them there.

So, a whole new era was beginning. We no longer needed to... the way we reported from the field when we had to go are long stories. Back then there was no fax but we had to dictate it by phone. Phone, the phones were static, we had to go to the post office. At some point we even had our own offices, representations of *Rilindja* in the main cities, we could call the editorial office from there. There was the worker who received the news in the newsroom.

But, in those first years, there was no one who knew how, a stenographer who knew how to get news because there were no letters, there wasn't Albanian tenography. It had to be written in Serbian, because only they knew, and then the Serbs dictated to the Albanian translators, the Albanian to the Albanian typist... it was a very long process. And now the faxes came and you could now write by fax in the field, put in the fax, and it went to the editorial office, and then the typing was done. Then, of course, you couldn't send the news as you send it online in the same way. I mean, everything changed, everything really changed. Computers, actual computers came.

Aurela Kadriu: How many floors did *Rilindja* have in that building?

Zenun Çelaj: 18.

Aurela Kadriu: Yes, *Rilindja*.

Zenun Çelaj: *Rilindja*. The editorial office of the newspaper, as a newspaper, *Rilindja* has had many units of its own. In addition to the printing house that was in the back, there was the newspaper's editorial office. We had five floors as a newspaper, then the editorial office of the magazines had two floors, there was *Fjala*, *Shkëndija*, *Gazeta e Pionerit*, there was... there was also *Gazeta e Pionerit* and *Pioneri*, *Bati*, and *Jeta e Re*. Later, in the meantime, they moved behind the police building in some barracks.

Then there was the editorial office of the publications that published **beterolistike**, not the Editorial Office of Textbooks and School Supplies, not *Libri Shkollorë*, but it published novels, poems. It had half a floor. Then they brought the *Jedinstvo* newspaper, which was a daily newspaper, and they brought it there. Then it was published twice a week in Turkish. Then I also remember the Textbooks and School Supplies Office, which had two and a half floors. I mean, that's how it was parted.

Aurela Kadriu: Was there any exchange? Was the purpose of those who put you all in the same building to convey the message of coexistence?

Zenun Çelaj: Now there was this idea initially when the palace was built that it was a very large building for the conditions of Kosovo. While the *Jedinstvo* newsrooms were located in a building now where the *Aleanca për Ardhmërinë e Kosovës* [*Alliance for the Future of Kosovo*] is, it was right in that building. Then it was somewhere else, I don't know where, somewhere in the city, and now there were expenses because at that time, everything was paid by the state. In order to rationalize their expenses, they then said, "Let there be a building where all the newsrooms will be located," plus there was also coexistence. We didn't have any special kind of communication. We met in the elevator and the buffet, but, at some point, all these newsrooms got separate cafeterias on their floors. But also there weren't any fights or anything.

Aurela Kadriu: Let's go back to '74, if you can, you probably were on duty the day of the declaration of, can you tell us about your memories?

Zenun Çelaj: Now, I said that the constitutional changes started as early as '68, so, after the student's protest. It was a process that had started before but this, how do I say, encouraged and accelerated this change, because it was... I said, Tito was a smart man and he wanted to have Yugoslavia under control, calm, to not have too much dissatisfaction. All under control, all a little dissatisfied, no one fully dissatisfied.

Discussions on constitutional amendments began, changes began, and the Yugoslav Constitution was amended. According to that constitution, then the Constitution of Kosovo also changed, so the statute. It wasn't a statute anymore but it was the Constitution of Kosovo. It took its own prerogatives. There were, the Assembly of Kosovo had five chambers. The joint work chamber, as it was called, it was collective. It was the chamber of the municipalities, it was the socio-political chamber, I don't remember which was the other chamber (laughs). Each had its own competencies and they were regulated by this constitution, the regulation.

Aurela Kadriu: How did the meeting happen... how do you remember that day?

Zenun Çelaj: The constitution of '74, not Yugoslavia because it, how do I say, it was the constitution that then imposed changes later in the Assembly of Yugoslavia. After all these preparations, amendments, as I said, in Kosovo, not only in Kosovo but also in other republics and provinces, Serbia tried with all its power to prevent this change and to adopt such a constitution at the level of Yugoslavia.

Kosovo then seceded, it was no longer treated as an exclusive authority of Serbia but it was also part of Yugoslavia. So, until then, the Constitution of Yugoslavia didn't mention the provinces, it said that the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia regulates the provinces. The two provinces because Vojvodina still continues to be. And now it regulates it, so, it is part of Yugoslavia but also of Serbia. And those main authorities were held by Yugoslavia. But Serbia had no right to make any decision that has weight for Kosovo without Kosovo. Kosovo had its right, that law or that decision couldn't be accepted...

Aurela Kadriu: After '74?

Zenun Çelaj: After '74, yes. So this was an event that was celebrated in Kosovo. Of course, then it couldn't be celebrated with weapons or anything like that, in intellectual circles but also politically, they also celebrated the change of the Constitution. Because the position of politicians itself was changing, it was also in the interest of personalities. However, when the Constitution was issued, I know, for example... that the Yugoslav constitution gave permission for the use of the national flag.

We received the announcement in the newsroom because then the communication with the newsrooms was fuller than it is today, interesting. The news came to us, it said, "The commissions have agreed", what they were, "to allow the use of the national flag of nationalities." I mean, not only the Albanians were allowed to, the Hungarians were also allowed, there were Slovaks in Croatia. There were Germans, later there was none of them left.

There was a journalist from Deçan in *Rilindja*, Isuf Rizi, he improvised as if there was a wedding and we found an Albanian flag. We made a line with cars. At that time, people just started to have private cars, we took the editorial office's cars aslo. We started from Prishtina, Ferizaj, Shtime, Suhareka, Prizren, Rahovec, Gjakova, Peja, Istog, Mitrovica, Vushtrri, Prishtina with a flag. Those scenes ... (cries) too bad we didn't have cameras to shoot with then.

So the flag and the right to speak Albanian, even in the Parliament of Yugoslavia of Serbia, this right was created, so, equal positions were set and this was it. I said, that's how we celebrated. Then there were no other weddings that didn't have the Albanian flag. At one time, they even started to come out only with the Albanian flag, then the issue became problematic and we were ordered to use two flags. Both the national flag and the state or Serbian flag, to calm down the Serbs.

Then Serbians began not to feel, not to feel dominant in Kosovo. They started to feel a little bit inferior, they started to move and then phases where the Serbian nationalists started to organize began, to protest, to slander, to fabricate that the Albanians are burning their houses, beating them, harassing them to change the situation. But until 1980 they could not, because Tito had the authority and he was already saying, "Yes, no", the others were silent. Even under this umbrella, how to say, they didn't raise their heads.

With the death of Tito, they then began to raise their heads and make efforts to reverse the situation when Serbia had all the control and surveillance over the province. Then came the demonstrations of '81 against these tendencies, and history took, how do I say, a completely different course.

Part Six

Zenun Çelaj: As I said, in the village before entering Suhareka, then we found out some families that had suffered for many years in prisons for national issues... because we used to go by car and honk the car horns at weddings, then like today. And when people came out, with families, with, one of those elders laid in front of the car, the other got in front of the car and kissed the flag (cries). We all cried, cried. These scenes were repeated almost everywhere.

We also stopped in Suhareka in the city. Suhareka is also known for these groups that have suffered because of national issues. It is one of the municipalities where there always was, interestingly, many arrests like that in the time of socialism, I mean, or even in the former Yugoslavia. Prizren, Gjakova, they were the ones who wouldn't let us go, with the flag, the same thing happened in Deçan. Until we got to Prishtina, I said, such scenes were repeated everywhere.

We spent the whole day, back then the roads were worse, slower. But it was sometime before it was officially legalized. But now we knew that this was allowed and couldn't be considered a criminal act. It was around September or October. Because somewhere in November, or December, I have now forgotten the date when the '74 constitution was adopted.

We were the ones to lead this, people were also surprised because the news wasn't public, so we came out first. I mean, it was, if it were recorded, it would be something that would surely touch everyone's hearts today.

Aurela Kadriu: Was it a work day?

Zenun Çelaj: No, we also chose the day because we were all at work and at that time we had work discipline. It was necessary to check. We chose a non-work day. If I'm not wrong, it was a Sunday, because weddings were held on Sundays as well, so it was like... but we didn't have any problems, neither the police nor anyone bothered us because it seems that this had happened in other districts as well, the announcement that the use of the flag is being legalized.

Aurela Kadriu: When the exchange with Albania opened, how did this affect *Rilindja's* work, because publications were exchanged.

Zenun Çelaj: Now, that happened immediately after the fall of Ranković. After that violent plenum of the Briones '66. Then these processes begin. Whereas in '68, '69, '70, the first exchanges of cultural and artistic groups had already begun, tourist visits were allowed, they could come from there, less from Albania and more from here. We were longing for Albania.

Whereas after '70, '72, then they started coming... when the University of Kosovo was established, they started coming as lecturers from Albania. Of course, these educational bodies were careful not to exaggerate because they were afraid a counter-effect would be created, so politics wouldn't get irritated, I mean, Serbian, ordered them to stop.

So special experts were called, of different fields, for example, for literature, almost no professors were called because this is content, how do I say, where you have to talk more about history, about other emotions, but, for example, about language., about the history of language, about grammar. Those that were more scientific were allowed, professors of physics, chemistry, then engineers of mechanics and so on.

When the Faculty of Medicine was established, lecturers came because we didn't have many lecturers in Kosovo in medical fields. What do I know, anatomy, that I don't know which ones, they are all ... I know that groups came in an organized way. And Kosovo signed, in fact, on behalf of Yugoslavia, that Kosovo had no subjectivity for foreign relations.

Yes, Kosovo signed on behalf of the Ministry of the Secretariat for Foreign Relations that belonged to Yugoslavia. It signed these protocols to... who would come to lecture here. In order not to seem that we are only getting professors from there, teams of professors from here were appointed to lecture at the University of Tirana.

Aurela Kadriu: Do you remember the first time you went there?

Zenun Çelaj: I went very late, I had some political problems at the time. I went to Albania in '92 for the first time.

Aurela Kadriu: What kind of problems?

Zenun Çelaj: They considered me a nationalist more than... maybe more than I was but...

Aurela Kadriu: Maybe because I was (laughs).

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, it really is so. I was a little more, I spoke more openly, I didn't always censor myself, and secondly, in my writings, I always looked for... because I used to write about the problems that were reflected, how do I say, these relations with Serbia, this has many times led to me being expelled from the party, being punished, changing the sector that I was in. From politics, for example, they told me to write about economics, because there's less politics in it and so... It seems like I'm bragging (laughs).

Aurela Kadriu: No, no, I just want to know because in all of these times which were far before my time, I don't remember, I can't remember at all...

Zenun Çelaj: There are many... not just you but there are many people who haven't lived in that time who when we talk about these topics they seem like fairy tales to them.

Aurela Kadriu: Yet all my questions are out of curiosity not to represent any position.

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, yes.

Aurela Kadriu: In '81, you were still a journalist, I am interested to know your personal experiences in all of these events I'm asking about. How do you remember it? What happened?

Zenun Çelaj: Now, 1980, Tito was sick... I always think of Tito or, the cult of personality, I said, even today people don't understand exactly, this is, how do I say, to be studied. He was sick, his death was expected day to day and it was expected, how do I say, that after Tito's death problems would happen, everything they had ... and that was what happened. We, how do I say it, they had a tighter grip on us, because Albanians, we were the only people or region that were not Slavs, others were all Slavs. They had their state even during the reign, Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia. But we were seen as more of a danger, so we were monitored by the services, by politics, I mean, other police services. Of course also from external services.

And whoever had a predisposition to be like that was prosecuted. So it also happened to me personally to be told, "Stop covering political organizations, the system, now deal with the economy." I even wrote about economics a few years back then. So they started within the framework of these restraints, these measures to not allow any outburst of dissatisfaction, they started arresting people who had unpaid mortgages, Adem Demaçi, and others, many times, and the people who surrounded him.

Those who were of the '68 [protests] of other known groups of Prizren processes. Dozens of groups happened, since World War II there has always been and the largest number of prisoners and political prisoners were Albanians in those prisons of Tito's Yugoslavia. So as I said, these measures also produce a countereffect. Therefore, it happened with a small spark that happened in the canteen of the students of the University of Prishtina, the same canteen that is there today, what is it called... a fight about the order who takes food first and it immediately exploded and a protest starts in the street, the demonstrations began.

I was over at Nehat Islami. Nehat is a colleague, he is younger than me, but has more experience as a journalist than me. He was the one who wrote the request to become a journalist for me. He was the Secretary of Information at that time.. There are no such information ministries now, but there were then. We were drinking tea with him, it could have been around noon, lunch. When they called, fast, it exploded, a student protest. From there, his house is at Hasan Prishtina School, do you know where it is?

Aurela Kadriu: Yes, yes.

Zenun Çelaj: His apartment. At the student canteen, the dormitories were near the tower buildings. We went running. We caught up with the first wave that had gone out into the street. Interesting luck. The crowd headed to the traffic light and came back up yelling, “Kosovo Republic”. One of them was the most noisy, I will never forget it because he is also a good orator, he is Ali Lajçi, is he a member of the parliament now? Yes. And he shouted as much as he could, chanting slogans, “Kosovo Republic, we want freedom, we want justice, down the cliques.” What do I know, like this. It was a mess, the members of the party committee came to try to calm it down, they called the professors to participate again.

I remember Femi Agani, Gazmend Zajmi, Suria Popovci, because I joined the crowd with them. I behaved as a journalist, I was happy about it, to be honest. Once the police came, they tried to get them inside, “Let's talk inside and see what the problems are, what your demands are.” Meanwhile, they started arresting people, then every day, these protests happened every day, the persecutions began, these Serbian police got brave, they thought that their day had come. I have seen some horrible scenes, but then, because they didn't until, practically, until liberation. Even after the liberation, Vetëvendosje didn't stop (laughs).

Aurela Kadriu: Did you report about it?

Zenun Çelaj: Well now, the same thing happened as in '68. I went to the newsroom again and said, “I saw everything, I covered it, I'm ready to make the report.” It was the same, “Whatever the Committee sends us, whatever *Tanjug* sends us.” The next day the protest took place, the news in the newspaper were five or six lines, nothing else. “There were disturbances, groups of students with conditions in the student canteen protested.” Like this.

Aurela Kadriu: Were also the professors included in the protest, or was it isolated?

Zenun Çelaj: Professors were always careful. I know cases where, for example, they encouraged students not to not stop. Of course, also advising them to be careful because then forces came from Serbia. Meanwhile, forces, units and police were brought from all over Yugoslavia, because the police were then told to monitor, to control the situation. Because they started, they didn't stop, they came. After '81 they continued permanently every year, every anniversary of '81. Because in March, it was March 11, if I'm not wrong. And then they had them, not only on March 11, but also on April 2, and as far as I know, there were always groups that marked the anniversary of one of them. So they continued. Then the miners' strike began, until the day the war began.

Aurela Kadriu: Do you want tea before we continue?

Zenun Çelaj: No, no.

Aurela Kadriu: I don't mind, honestly.

Zenun Çelaj: No, no, I have water.

Aurela Kadriu: Okay. I wanted to ask you because the last time you mentioned Božur, and before we get to the '90s, I want to talk about Prishtina as a city. Then the Grand Hotel got build, New Year's Eve begins to be celebrated there...

Zenun Çelaj: Grand came later. Božur was the first modern hotel in Prishtina. Now it doesn't look the same. At its forefront were Miloš Obilić's fighters, or I don't know what the heroes of the Kosovo war were called. They were in the shape of a mosaic... I haven't looked but I think they removed them recently.

Aurela Kadriu: I don't think I've ever seen it.

Zenun Çelaj: They were, maybe there are pictures. Now it was a hotel, very modern for that time, very frequented, we went there as journalists. Back then it was interesting for journalists to be more at cafes, to drink. I drank a little but I had a low tolerance, so I can't say that I drank raki¹⁵ or beer, but I drank a little to accompany others. New Year's Eve was celebrated there, other celebrations. There was a hall downstairs, the hall where... I haven't been there in a long time to be honest, there was a wide terrace, but the new owner, Pacolli, has changed it quite a lot. While Grand was built later, it was more exclusive. We went there, but it was more for internationals. Then it was for more elite people that came here.

Aurela Kadriu: What about Božur, do you have any personal experiences like you told me about the canteen? Something like that.

Zenun Çelaj: I had an experience in Božur when they took me on November 27...

Aurela Kadriu: Ah, yes.

Zenun Çelaj: Yes. On November 27, a day before November 28, flag day, this was in '63, 1963. Two of my friends had come from *Flaka e Vllaznimit* [*Flame of Brotherhood*], it was... I forgot his name. So, he was the editor in chief of *Flaka e Vllaznimit*, and one of his colleagues from Kumanova. The earthquake in Skopje also happened in '63, sometime in February. And at that time, instead of giving the people who were harmed money, they gave them checks.

They had to use them to buy construction material to rebuild their houses. They had come to cash in the checks in Kosovo, they went to enterprises in Kosovo, so I met with them. A person I didn't recognize, I think I told you last time? He came and said, "Come out with us." When I went out he said, "Get in the police car." And they took me to the police station. In the meantime, they had taken my friends also, but I didn't know.

¹⁵ *Raki* is a very common alcoholic drink made from distillation of fermented fruit.

“What did you celebrate?” “Nothing, my friends came here, we met.” Now, the truth is we congratulated each other on the flag, because in ‘63, it was forbidden. And I didn’t admit to anything, they hadn’t either. Then they beat me up, I was all bruised. My whole body was bruised. So, this a memory from that time in Božur.

Then, as I said, I went, of course, because that would happen, but then the circumstances changed. After ‘68, it was another atmosphere, they didn’t dare... they could do it even then, but not just because you’re Albanian.

Aurela Kadriu: Did you see... I’m asking you more about the Brotherhood and Unity Square because you moved from *Rilindja* at the prison to the big *Rilindja*. And I’m asking you about it because you experienced the old city, the transformation. At the same time, with the city’s transformation, you move to the new palace. What was the old city like? How do you remember it in your time?

Zenun Çelaj: Now where the Nënë Tereza Boulevard is... it was a street, in the beginning it was cobbled, when I first came to Prishtina. There were these buildings, *Koha Ditore*, Rings, and some other restaurants, Božur and so on. There was the building where now the Ministry of Culture is, and the other buildings in front of it, *Oda Ekonomike*, PDK [Democratic Party of Kosovo], and some private apartments. These were the buildings when I came to Prishtina.

But, the street was more narrow, it was a street, buses and cars passed by there. The tall building of the Assembly of Kosova. That one, to be honest, it was built, just part of it, not all of it. The annex part was added later, the one with the windows, where you can see the stairs from outside.

The other part was there, it looked like an agricultural cooperative. It was a tacky, exactly of the socialist system, Russian, typically Russian. In the meantime, the annex was added, that part. The one with the windows, glass windows, on the other side. And in the middle of this and the building which we used to call Social Security, now...

Aurela Kadriu: The Ministry of Labor was there later.

Zenun Çelaj: I don’t know what it is now...

Aurela Kadriu: I don’t know.

Zenun Çelaj: In the meantime Bakos was built, a tall building with windows. The street was through this building and the Assembly. It was closed later... from ProCredit to the Municipality, until there. While on the other side, from Skenderbeu’s monument and on, there was a street. There were restaurants and bookstores on both sides. There were two or three bookshops there, restaurants, and you would walk up to the old post office which was bombed. It doesn’t exist anymore. It looked like that. Way before, it was behind the Assembly, so from the square, what do we call it now? Adem Jashari...

Aurela Kadriu: Yes.

Zenun Çelaj: That part used to be covered, it was a kapali [Turkish - covered] bazaar. I think there were some walls, maybe there used to be a castle, I don't know. There are still traces of the walls in those streets near the Assembly of Kosova. When you walk around there, you can see traces of those walls, I don't know, no one dealt with it anymore. So, this was the modern part, there were almost no other tall buildings, and the one where the police station is today. The other ones were built later, the ones on the side, where Cinema Vllaznimi is and downwards. While the other parts from *Rilindja* and onward were old buildings, up to the music school and onward, this other one is relatively preserved, the one behind the museum, between Elena Gjika School near the mosque, near the hammam. This road from Elena Gjika that goes through, goes through Taukbahçja, it was a narrow cobbled street, old buildings on both sides. While the other street that is parallel to Bajram Kelmendi, the river flowed there, it was the Prishtevka river.

Aurela Kadriu: One more question before we get to the '90s because it's an entirely different period, and I don't want to cause problems in your thoughts. I want to talk about your family. How did you meet your wife?

Zenun Çelaj: We're starting? I was a student in Gjakova, as I told you last time I changed schools, I was there in the second year in *Normale*. Students who came to the dormitory from Gjakova were looked at differently. My wife was in the last years of elementary school, she sang.

She was part of the Hajdar Dushi Society. Even though she was in elementary school she looked older. And we met... she was a student, a singer, I was a student in *Normale*, nothing more. We were together, a few years went by, she finished high school in Gjakova, came to Prishtina, I also came from Prizren to *Normale* here, to become a journalist. And we met each other again, familiar faces. "Is it you?" "It's me." And like this, how do I say, we reconnected and in the meantime we got married.

Aurela Kadriu: Where did you meet?

Zenun Çelaj: We... it was the student dormitory, it was called the house of foresters, near Fadil Hoxha's house, on the right side... I don't know what it is now, an agency or something. At that time the house of foresters was turned into a student dormitory. She had just come. And we met there on the top of the road and (laughs) history continued. But, it was a problematic marriage. At the time when we met, she was engaged to someone else, because of course we didn't see each other or have any kind of relationship. It was an engagement against her will, even though they were an intellectual family. It so happened, as I said, we reconnected. She broke up with her fiancé who was a student in Zagreb. Maybe even distance affected it, how would I know. And in '63, in those dramatic years, I got married (laughs). I was 23 years old, she was 20.

Aurela Kadriu: Can you tell me a little about your children?

Zenun Çelaj: Now, when we got married she had troubles with pregnancy, with carrying children. She had two or three miscarriages. And after getting treatments, after medical care in '68, our first son was born. He is now an engineer, lives in London. He works in his profession, Arianit. The other was born later, in '73. In the meantime she got sick and died in '95 from cancer.

Aurela Kadriu: Where was your house? Apart from all the moving?

Zenun Çelaj: I've moved around a lot, until, a lot, until '63 to '68 when I got an apartment, because back then the state gave apartments, so the enterprise, state apartment. I rented an apartment not too far from here. It was in the middle of where ProCredit used to be and a road there in the end. I lived there for about two years and then near the railway, the road that takes you to the graveyard, the new apartment there, the landlord was a Gorani man, a very good man, I will owe him my whole life. Because honestly, how do I say, he was very human to me. I lived there for another three years and I rented an apartment in Ulpiana near Hasan Prishtina School, until '83. Until '83 I began construction and moved where I live today in Velania.

Aurela Kadriu: What happened at *Rilindja* during the '90s.

Zenun Çelaj: It was dramatic. At *Rilindja* they considered us... they considered us and we were, how do I say, a well-organized place which resisted the Serbian tendencies to turn that situation around before the fourth plenum of the Brions. Which meant to take all control and limit our rights. We wrote, really bravely at that time. There were... it wasn't just us. There was also the television at that time, Radio Prishtina and the Television of Prishtina, as it was called then.

Those massive protests, as they were called then, happened at that time. There were marches, the workers trying to protect that autonomy that we considered and was almost a republic even though we weren't a republic. There were worker marches of citizens all over Kosova. We covered everything and reported bravely.

Then the miners' strike happened... it is, how do I say, the anniversary, today with Ibrahim Osmani, he is a journalist at *Koha*, back then he used to work at the Provincial Committee, but he was a very good man. He was on his way to Thessaloniki and he wrote to me, he said, "30 years..." he said, "they arrested me." So they took him, and then after a while, on March 4, they took me. They arrested him on March 1, and me on March 4, as organizers of the miners' strike.

Aurela Kadriu: Why as organizers?

Zenun Çelaj: Well, I reported from there...

Aurela Kadriu: You were there?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, yes. The moment the news came from the journalist, the correspondent in Mitrovica, that the miners are on strike in defense of the Constitution of the Autonomy of Kosovo. Then I went to

join them and report and got inside. Then I reported from there constantly and then I was arrested. When the miners were taken out of the strike... because it was a hunger strike that got the attention of the whole world opinion. It was, to say, the second time in the world that miners closed down in the mine, ready to die on underground horizons 800 to 1200-1300 meters deep...

Aurela Kadriu: You also went there?

Zenun Çelaj: I was there with them. But I didn't call myself a protestor, but a reporter. I stayed with them, took their statements, how do I say, described the situation. It was a miserable condition, very hard. There were cases when people... some hard headed people who didn't even want to drink water, to really die. And this was treated as encouragement, as an inspiration for people to protest and to be forced to self-destruct. It was a very serious charge that went up to 15 years in prison. Because at that time in Yugoslavia the death sentence and sentence for life were removed. So, they arrested me on this charge, even though the strike was treated as an organization... because destruction really started then.

Part Seven

Aurela Kadriu: I didn't know you were inside...

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, I was.

Aurela Kadriu: What was it like on the inside? What did you see?

Zenun Çelaj: Look, now the groups of miners that were inside didn't want to come out. They asked for the resignation of Ali Shukriu, an exponent... of Serbian politics. There was also Husamedin Azemi and Rrahman Morina. Because they were in power, in fact, Belgrade brought them. The Serbian regime with the measures they took in Kosova.

They demanded the return of autonomy, that autonomy, of that constitution and resignation of all of them. And of course they didn't want to and resisted until after eight days I think. I forgot now, eight-nine days. They brought a false letter that they had resigned, asked them to come out and deceived the miners. Now I was down there and, when they started coming out, I went out to report to the newspaper. To show that they... thinking that they really resigned.

"They resigned, the miners are coming out..." when I finished reporting they said to me, "Veton Surroi is calling you." I talked to Veton, he said, "Tell them that they are lying, they didn't resign." I went back, but they were coming out. They were in very bad conditions, they hadn't gone out all in those days, it was dark down there. Have you ever been down there?

Aurela Kadriu: No, no.

Zenun Çelaj: There, there is only enough light for orientation, there's a lot of wind, because the galleries comminuted with each other. The ore that is extracted crosses and becomes like a labyrinth, those currents cross each other very dangerously. So, these minerals are always extracted... there are those angles where they can stay during the time they explode because the ore is also extracted with explosion, with dynamite and various explosions.

They stayed there, how do I say, they stayed all in one place to warm up each other and there would be less wind, they would drink water, because water is salvation during hunger strikes. So, people don't die. People said that they brought food through holes and so on but they actually didn't eat, it was a hunger strike, all of them.

There people, as I said, that would faint and back then there were care services that took them, ambulances. It was up there, you had to go up with an elevator. Then from the elevator in railway-like rails but narrow. The wagons are narrow, small, they put them at the door. That's how they took them to the ambulance. There were.... I don't remember the exact number of people who needed help, but it was a big number.

In the meantime party emissaries and politicians at the Yugoslav level also came. There was Stipe Šušvar, a known personality and the head of Yugoslavia, of the party. They came to convince the miners but they were very persistent, so it was in vain, they couldn't convince them.

Aurela Kadriu: Did you go outside?

Zenun Çelaj: I went outside just to report, just to report. They were organized, and it's interesting because they didn't let the police come and arrest people, the strikers. Because of the fear that more people would join them, because... then miners' streaks happened in other mines as well. Here, in Kishnica, Hajvali, Gjakova, in Magure there's another mine, these... one in Obiliq, the students striked inside the Faculty...

Aurela Kadriu: In 1 Tetori Hall?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, in 1 Tetori Hall, the schools started... and it really took on the dimensions of an uprising, peaceful but victimization that reached the whole world.

Aurela Kadriu: Then, when the violent measures came...

Zenun Çelaj: Well, it preceded... it was... this was preceded by delegates, members of parliament. On July 2, 1990, they called me with a constitutional statement which was written by the late Gazmend Zajmi, he was an academic. I was friends with him, I had created a name as a journalist, Zenun, and I was also friends with Fehmi Agani and other professors.

And as we were walking one of those gloomy nights, Gazmend said to me, “Zenun, as a journalist, you know the delegates,” meaning the members of the parliament, that’s what they were called then. He said, “It’s good to issue a constitutional statement, as a legitimate body.” At that time a constitutional declaration was issued by the Slovenian Parliament, which was seceding from Yugoslavia. It was issued by several parliaments of the Baltic countries that were part of the Soviet Union, Lithuania, Estonia. I mean, Gazmend probably got the idea here.

He said, “It’s good for our people to do it too. Do you have anyone to talk to?” I did. I had my brother-in-law and my wife’s niece. My brother-in-law, Sabri Hashani, was a delegate, the other one was Leonora Ibishi from Gjakova, now a doctor in Switzerland, she was a doctor even back then. I said, “Yes, I do.” He said, “Good, let’s meet tomorrow.” We met, he came to me by car to the house in Velania, where I live. He had written that statement by hand. The content is now known. He dictated to me and I typed it on the typewriter. I forced him, he didn’t want to, but if I had known to keep it back then, we would take care of each other.

I was expecting to be arrested and I didn’t want them to find it as a *corpus delicti* so I tore it apart, the handwritten one. I found my brother-in-law. They had already fired Albanian delegates from the Assembly. Belgrade, Serbia had taken control. I gave him the text and the delegates organized and they held meetings. Even then, there were committees like the parliamentary committee now. In buildings like this at Kurrizi in the house of a delegate from Prizren. They gathered in his apartment and called me.

“We are reviewing the constitutional statement, can you come? We have only one request.” They asked me to remove a point from... there were six points, if I’m not wrong. That sixth point really seemed too much, there was no need to say, as long as this happened, this, inform these, these. There was no need for that. They said to me, “Will you talk to Gazmend?” Because I told them who wrote it, “So, if he agrees to remove it.” I met Gazmend, we removed that point. I mean... and on July 2, it... they gathered and didn’t let them get inside, they gathered in front of the parliament, at the entrance and there they read the declaration. Voted with fingers, the people were watching what was happening from all sides. On the side towards the municipality, the army had brought tanks, police in all directions, but they declared it and applauded.

They also brought a group... we knew when the announcement would be made. A friend from Switzerland who worked at the United Nations, from Zhegra, Gjilan, we called him and told him. He had his own money, he financed a group, the French Committee for Human Rights, a federation, not a committee, the Federation for Human Rights, and he sent them here. We called a woman from America, she was blind, she worked, she was president, she is still alive but very sick in America, her name was Eva Brendley. She came with her dog. We knew a few days before, we wanted to create, so, an international legitimacy. That not only delegates but also external observers were there, approved the constitutional declaration.

After all this, Belgrade was very angry then and had taken control of the police, internal affairs, the assembly, the institutions. They came, they made a decision, among other things, “Suppressed...” on

July 5 this happened. “The Assembly of Kosovo is suppressed, all the prerogatives are taken by Serbia and the publication of *Rilindja* is banned, the broadcast with RTP is interrupted.” These are the moments when they entered by force and stopped us. At that time I continued to be a journalist and I was also a secretary in the Human Rights Council. The chief, who was also my nephew, was in America, Elez Biberaj.

I informed him quickly and he said, “Wait, call me.” Because it was very expensive back then to make calls from the palace. As soon as we started, because we had our offices on the third floor, the internal editorial office, on the third floor... We organized with guards so that, if the police came, they would notify us. The moment I called him, he called me and I started reporting for Voice of America, they came.. I told him, “Elez, call me again on this number,” on the next floor, so I struggled to give the report that day.

It was an interesting drama. But they didn’t arrest me that night, it didn’t happen. After two days they came and arrested me. So, like this. In the meantime, because then the Kaçanik Assembly happened. Following the constitutional declaration, the Academy of Sciences and Arts came out with a professional assessment. It was Gazmend, Rexhep Qosaj, Idriz Ajeti, and others. They supported the constitutional declaration and all the resistance.

Among other things there was another conclusion that was asked of the delegates, those who were still there but not allowed to go inside, as information to bring out a constitution. The constitution about Kosovo. Again, Gazmend wrote the text. Back then there was an organization called Albanian Alternative. It was within the framework the Human Rights Council, the Democratic League that was formed, it was the Peasant Party, it maybe was the youth forum or something like this, I forgot.

While the Alternative Forum was in order because they had organized it in a way that for a week or a month they would take the head of a different party. Once LDK, then the Council, one month the Liberal Party, one month the Peasant Party. And now it was Veton Surroi’s turn, he was the leader. And at a meeting at the Youth Palace I told him and came out to read the text. The delegates applauded and went on September 5, until it was drafted, because a group of lawyers, constitutionalists was organized and the text of the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo was drafted.

Aurela Kadriu: Were you also there?

Zenun Çelaj: I had the honor of being there. I was involved because that constitution was mainly written in my neighborhood... in the house of a businessman, Xhevdet Shoshi. He now is the owner of Banja of Peja. He had bought a house from a Serb, he worked... when the schools and universities were closed down, the Rectorate of the University moved to his house.

He also had equipment in his house, he had printers, rooms, his house was big. So the house was drafted in house basically. So the constitution that would be declared in Kaçanik. And on the day when... because they had talked to the compilers. They said, “Could you come?” I said, “It would be an honor.” Then they said, “You find the cameraman and the photoreporter so we can record this event.”

And with the numbers I had back then I looked for the cameraman. There were none. They had already closed down the television but I looked for them in their houses, “Does anyone have a camera?” No one did. As a photoreporter I took Bylykbash, a tall guy...

Aurela Kadriu: Sadik?

Zenun Çelaj: No, no. I forgot... he ties his hair back. I forgot his name. Anyways, I found him, I said, “We have to meet.” I didn’t know if they were spying on my phone. I said, “This, this, the declaration of the constitution...” because they notified me, they said, “Take on the delegates...” who was my neighbor, “the cameraman and the photoreporter in the same car.” I didn’t have a car at that time. I went to a neighbor, Vula, he is a lawyer now, I forgot his name, Avni Vula.

I asked him to take us there, I told him the purpose and where we’re going. He didn’t hesitate. The delegate was the wife of pharmacists from Preševo, her name is Afijete. I told her that I would go get her. The photoreporter, I mean I didn’t find a cameraman. Bylykbashk, not Ilazi, but his cousin, he is very tall, actually his mother is Serbian (laughs), but he is a patriot.

And they told me how it, I’ve described this journey because we had to be there at 08:00 in the evening. But they had appointed, the organizer who called is a... I forgot his name now. He is from Gostivar, but he was the secretary in the Assembly. He notified me, we met. He said, “At 08:00 in the Palace of Culture in Kaçanik. But you...” he said, “you have to come at around 07:30, not earlier.” They had apportioned delegates of different cities to come at different times so they wouldn’t stand out to the police.

Because back then licence plates, for example, Gjakova was registered as DJ, Peja as PJ, Prizren as PZ, Mitrovica as MD, Prishtina as PR and so on. So they wouldn’t stand out that they were coming to Kaçanik, a car from Mitrovica, “What are you doing here?” Two-three cars coming from Gjakova... they had set different times so they wouldn’t be noticed. And they put me in line, so at 07:30.

There was a patrol in the street where Ferizaj parts from Mitrovica. “When you pass through that street there will be a truck, under the truck there will be a person pretending to fix it. If he is wearing a white blanket, stop and ask him because the situation might have changed.” Like in the war.

Aurela Kadriu: At the white blanket.

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, “So if the blanket is white, stop, the patrol will tell you if something’s changed. If he tells you, “Go on,” you can go on. When you get to Kaçanik, they will stop you and before asking you anything, you can tell them there’s a circumcision ceremony and so they will know you’re with us. They will take you, hide the car, and take you to the House of Culture.” And so, when I went to Kaçanik, I don’t know if you’ve ever been there?

Aurela Kadriu: Yes.

Zenun Çelaj: So, in the downhill there, some people waved at me. I said, “There’s a circumcision ceremony.” One came with me and took me there, we passed the bridge of Lepenc, put the car in the yard of a house. They led me and wanted me to walk down the shore of Lepenc to the House of Culture, which was not about 100 meters from the police station. It was no further. Inside the hall, the hall of the House of Culture, the people, the lights on the windows of the building were turned off, only in the hall there was light so it wouldn’t stand out, probably. The delegates inside were in order. Before, “Assembly of Kaçanik, July 2, 1990,” was written in a letter.

At the forefront was Ilaz Ramajli, there was, he was the chairman. Because after the parliament was dissolved, they did this. It was... you can find the names written somewhere because I can’t remember everyone who was there. The meeting started, it went very fast, the constitution was read, the people had read it before, the signatures of the delegates, the list was made beforehand and everyone had signed so that we would not waste time because it lasted around 20 minutes, no more. The whole procedure, the resolution was read, the decisions that went along with the resolution were read and we were distributed. That was it.

Aurela Kadriu: How did the people get informed?

Zenun Çelaj: Then, I went back to the newsroom that night, it was around 9:30. Because I was with Avni Vula, the delegate and the photoreporter. And, I forgot, we made a deal with the delegates ... because people always said that they fled but in fact did not flee. It was the order that, “The delegates should scatter, get out of Kosovo,” because Yugoslavia had already begun to disintegrate then. Yes, “Let them leave Kosovo so that the police won’t have the opportunity to take someone and force them to say that they were forced to sign it. This way, they would not be here and this would be avoided.” So, they were told to leave, “Don’t stay here for a while.” And so it happened. They went away that night. The next day I... that night I returned to Prishtina but even the delegates themselves had told some people.

I remember I met Albin Kurti’s¹⁶ father, he worked at *Rilindja*, he was an engineer, Zaim Kurti. He always called me, “Uncle Zenun,” because he was younger than me, Zaim. “Uncle Zenun, I heard that the delegates declared the constitution.” “Where?” “In Dubrovnik.” Who knows how he found out. I said, “Not in Dubrovnik, somewhere else.” And I left. In the meantime I met someone else, “I heard that the constitution was declared.” I said, “Where?” He said, “In Durrës.” “No, not in Durrës, somewhere else.” And so I didn’t tell them more, because I was the one who was supposed to make it public.

The next day I talked to the photoreporter. I wrote the text and I talked to *Zëri*, it used to be *Zëri i Rinise* but we then called it just *Zëri*. We had removed the other part. There were Bardh Hamza, Blerim Shala, they were head of thenewsroom. They were excited because they knew this was going to happen. We made... I have to digress again. *Rilindja* stopped publishing since July 5. As *Rilindja*, so, not with same

¹⁶ Albin Kurti (1975-) leading activist and former leader of Vetëvendosje!, is the Prime Minister of Kosovo. In 1997, he was the leader of the students protests against school segregation and the closing of the Albanian language schools.

name, but it was published sometimes as *Bujk*, *Shkëndija*, *Fjala*, sometimes *Gazeta e Pionerit*, *Bat*. Because these were not forbidden. *Rilindja* was stopped by a court in Belgrade and, how do I say, it was automatically incriminated.

That day it was *Zëri*'s turn to come out as *Rilindja*. And we talked about it, I would write the text and everything. I wrote it. He had brought the pictures, but he had signed them with his name. I said, "Do you want to sign it?" "You don't have to, but I want to." He said. "I want to, also." And we both signed with our full names, that's how it got published in the newspaper. Now instead of looking for the delegates, they took us to prison. We were in prison for a month, a month and a half.

Aurela Kadriu: Where?

Zenun Çelaj: Here, they kept us in the prison of Prishtina. I remember a, because it was interesting, now I don't know her name, I forgot, she was the secretary to the editor-in-chief. The police had come to look for me, there was a buffet there and she came and said, "Zenun, the police are looking for you, I didn't tell them you were here if you want to run!" And I said, "No, I don't want to run, I'm here." They arrested me and so on.

Then there were the big developments known after the '90s, after *Rilindja*, because the protests never stopped. They stopped the newspapers, then in the beginning we replaced all the other newspapers only with *Bujk*. Like this until, just before the bombing.

Aurela Kadriu: Where were you working? Since *Rilindja* was closed.

Zenun Çelaj: Then they threw us out of there and we worked from home.

Aurela Kadriu: Each in your own house.

Zenun Çelaj: Yes. The editorial office was sometimes placed in one house, sometimes in another house, as I said, the technology was computerized. There were computers and it would be done. We didn't need any printing...

Aurela Kadriu: How did you print it then?

Zenun Çelaj: With the computer. Even now it's done like that, it's electronic.

Aurela Kadriu: What about distribution?

Zenun Çelaj: Distribution, it was distributed like that. Sometimes the police would stop us in the streets, sometimes people would come and get it. In a way... however we could.

Aurela Kadriu: What happened then when the population found out about the Declaration of Kaçanik?

Zenun Çelaj: I was a joy, incredible joy. People thought Kosovo was becoming a republic, but then the persecutions from the Serbs began, and so did the killings. The series of different massacres began. UÇK also was declared. And then, in fact, the situation, this drama continued until June 12, 1999, when KFOR entered Kosovo.

Part Eight

Aurela Kadriu: The LDK before the war and for the Council and then the war and after war. If there isn't enough time we'll continue another day.

Zenun Çelaj: Now, after these mass protests, the mistreatment of protesters, people being beaten on the street, in working organizations, many were fired from state institutions, health, education, schools were expelled, the university, everything. An attempt to organize the parallel system began. Fortunately, the health and education system organized, schools were set up in private homes, and university, health, Nënë Tereza¹⁷ started here and in other municipalities. So, a parallel life began.

In the meantime, political parties were also organized. The League of Communists was abandoned overnight. Us from *Rilindja*, the staff of *Rilindja*, we came out with a justification letter, a few lines written by Ramush Tahiri. Now, you know Ramush, the analyst who often appears on television, he was then a journalist at *Rilindja*. And he wrote the text that, "In this situation when the party, the League of Communists is, mistreated, mistreated Albanians, has done this bad thing, this bad thing." The text is published. And we, the journalists of *Rilindja*... The organization of the League of Communists at *Rilindja* collectively abandon the League of Communists and we signed it.

The news was broadcasted at that time by the Television of Prishtina, which was still in operation, and basically in 24 hours the League of Communists was abandoned. In this atmosphere attempts to create Albanian parties started. There was an attempt from Zagreb, a well-known professor, a Croat, who wanted to create a party here in Kosovo that would be an alternative to the League of Communists, the League of Socialists, the parties that were on the scene until then.

This alternative was by Veton Surroi with Shkelzen Maliqi and some others. In this atmosphere of trying to create this alternative, Mehmet Kraja, Ibrahim Berisha, who is a university professor, undertake an initiative to form the Democratic League of Kosovo, which will be an Albanian party. In the meantime, a writer joins them, he was also a journalist in *Rilindja*, I don't remember his name at the moment.

So, Veton, Shkëlzen Maliqi was the other party that they wanted to create. But the idea came, Mehmet Kraja, Ibrahim Berisha, Isuf Buxhovi, and others say they are forming an Albanian party, which would

¹⁷ Mother Teresa, the self-help organization that during the 1990s, at the height of Milošević's repression, supported the parallel society of Albanians, expelled from all state institutions and services.

be called the Democratic League. They also started collecting signatures, I was also among them, I'm in the group of first signers of this initiative.

Meetings and all activities... because all institutions were closed, we had nowhere to go. There was only the Writers' League left in the barracks near the stadium where the president of the association, the Writers' League of Kosovo, was Ibrahim Rugova, we held meetings there. And of course Ibrahim [Rugova] joined this initiative. Many other intellectuals joined, lawyer Bajram Kelmendi, and others, there are too many to mention.

And we formed the Democratic League, we announced and we declared Ibrahim Rugova president. Ibrahim did not object. There was an idea at that time to nominate Rexhep Qosja or Gazmend Zajmi or Fehmi Agani for president, but also because of the environment, since he was the president of the association, and the association was not bothered, we focused on Ibrahim and he accepted it without any problems. Even so, at that founding conference, after we announced that the initiative group was being established, we went to the madrasa, not here where the Islamic Faculty is, but the madrasa in the direction of Llukar.

The madrasa allowed us to hold this founding conference where the president was elected, the governing structures were elected, and it continued and still exists. It undoubtedly played an important role, but before the Democratic League as the first non-governmental organization that was outside the system at that time, the Council for Human Rights and Freedom was established.

The council started as, had started as an initiative in the Faculty of Law. And there Gazmend Zajmi, Rexhep Qosja, Bardhyl [Çaushi], his son is in Vetëvendosje, had started an initiative to form a council that would deal with the protection of freedom of speech. Are you tired? [addresses the interlocutor]

Aurela Kadriu: No, no. I was just thinking because I know who you're talking about, Bardhyl, but I don't remember his last name, I was thinking along with you.

Zenun Çelaj: Not Bardhyl Zajmi, but Bardhyl Nushi, but... anyway. Maybe I'll remember in the meantime.

Aurela Kadriu: Anyway, I can't remember either.

Zenun Çelaj: There had begun an effort to create, to issue a council that would deal with the protection of freedom of speech and expression. Meanwhile, Zekerija Cana intervenes and says, "No, let's form a Council for the Protection of Human Rights and Freedom." Such a council was formed in Slovenia, and Sali Kabashi worked there in an Albanian-language publication in Ljubljana with a group of human rights activists from France, the Federation for Human Rights.

I remember Antonio Garapone, I remember because I worked a lot with him then. He was the chairman of this council and even at that time they came to Prishtina. And they came, they called the initiators,

they called me too as a journalist and as an activist of these other movements, and we decided to form the Human Rights Council.

We formed it, we were looking for who to make the president. It was required at that time to have a president who has no history that could be criminalized by the Serbian regime. We found Idriz Ajeti, who died recently, a hundred years old. A man with a lot of authority, very, how do I say, significant for Albanian culture. We asked him, “Yes of course, *babush*.¹⁸” It was... we called him *babush*.

We elected him president, Zekerija Cana was the secretary for a while, then the roles changed. Because even back then, Idriz was older. He was old, plus he had nothing to do with law, with these, he was in the field of literature, he himself said, “It would be good to have a lawyer as president.” We had gathered 20-30 people in the Council, now I don’t remember the exact number, but chosen personalities of culture, science, and the most well-known lawyers.

Among them, Bajram Kelmendi, Fazli Bala... there are many, now I don’t remember all of them. It was also proposed to take Bajram Kelmendi who was a well-known lawyer in all of Yugoslavia at the time. He was feared by judges everywhere in Yugoslavia, he was very good. We made Bajram president and I was elected secretary and that is how we continued until Adem Demaçi was released from prison.

Then he was proposed because he had legitimacy, his biography was known internationally. He was, how do I say, synonymous with the oppression of Albanians. Amnesty International, so many protests and demonstrations, the Amnesty International organizations had written many letters in defense of Adem Demaçi and his cause. And Bajrami himself said, “Let’s do it, let’s choose Adem because he has an international reputation and affirms both our problem and the council.” Bajram [means Adem Demaçi] was also elected .

Aurela Kadriu: Can we start and tell us where you were during the war?

Zenun Çelaj: During the bombings, because the war had started earlier. The war started before the bombing started and the bombing was a result of the situation that was created before the war itself started. In the reprisals with the violence exercised by the Milošević regime against the population in Kosovo, as we mentioned, expulsion from work, closing of institutions, schools, universities, so each of these made life impossible and ended with the war.

Whereas, what the Milošević regime did was the persecution of the people, the deportation, so an attempt to do an ethnic cleansing. To create a situation in which, according to their projects of the Academy of Sciences, the structure of the Albanian population in Kosovo would not be dominant, but the Serbians would be. Hence they could do whatever they wanted in a territory where they were the majority.

¹⁸ Endearing way of calling someone grandfather.

While in very beginning of the bombings, the night the bombing began on March 24, 1999 I was in my apartment, in my house in Velania and from there alone, I was alone because my son, Lirak, he went into the UÇK beforehand, around July-August of that year. My wife and children were in Macedonia and Struga, where she was originally from.

It was a frightening night because a war had not known until then was beginning. There were the NATO bombings of Serbian targets, strategically formulated by the action of NATO forces coming by plane at high altitudes from bases in the Mediterranean. It was an indescribable joy because it was expected, and not only expected, but it was a sign that a terrible time was ending, a hard time for all Albanians in this part of the Balkans.

Two days prior, I met with Fehmi Agani, who was part of the delegation of Kosovo to the talks in France after Rambouillet and he with some other representatives of the Kosovo delegation had returned to Brussels, to NATO headquarters. They had talked in NATO, they were very sure that everything would last two or three days and it would end and that would be, as they said, a happy ending to all the tragedy we had experienced.

With that desire, with that mindset, I was alone in the house, so when the lights went out, I went out on the terrace, the balcony of the house, it's tall and I could see the city, the airport and Goleshi, which were the targets of those bombings. On the opposite side, a high mountain at the top of Gërmia, where the antennas used by the army were, the then-Yugoslav army and was almost in a Yugoslav way.

You could see the flames coming out of them, it was, as I said, a great pleasure and it was expected that in two or three days everyone else would return and everything would calm down. To start schools, to start work in institutions. But that didn't happen.

The Serbian army was certainly prepared with the instructions of their allies, especially the Russians, although they also somehow agreed to a bombing after what had happened in Bosnia. All that tragedy, the mass killings. But, the next day, on the 25th, soldiers and police came to every door and said, "In ten minutes, everyone should leave, we will kill whoever stays."

Aurela Kadriu: Did they also come to your house?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, they came to my house, they found me there and said, "Leave the door open." That's what I did and left. Luckily, I had a brother who had an apartment in Ulpiana and my niece went there with her husband and her children. They came from Barileva, a village near Prishtina. An apartment building where there weren't many Albanians, Albanian families, three or four, the rest were Serbs and I left to go there. On the way, I was curious about what had happened and initially stopped to contact Bajram Kelmendi's family, because I had heard that the police or paramilitary had taken Bajram with his children, so I could find out what happened.

But, the door was closed and no one was there so I couldn't find out. I continued on my way, I stopped at the *Koha* editorial office, which was being published until that day. The moment I wanted to enter

the building, where the Mother Teresa Boulevard is, there was a guard with a machine gun and just pointed his machine gun at me and another said, "Do not enter, a person was killed inside." They had killed that newsroom guard.

So, the city was quiet, there were no people, no one was outside except some people here and there in uniforms, the police, or soldiers. I continued to Ulpiana, entered my brother's apartment and didn't leave for 60 days. I stayed inside. I would look out the window so see what was happening.

Luckily some of my friends moved around, I don't know where they got the courage, I had another reason to not go out, I had two charges after two arrests. I was afraid that one of them would recognize me and take me and it would be the end of me. But, unfortunately I was also sick, I had stomach problems. I had an illness which I suffered from for many years.

That even my son, Lirak, from the front, in the area of Llap, called me, because we had a telephone connection left and a man from Prizren, the post office, or those who took over the post office thought... because they cut off all Albanian telephones, only Serbs and those who were not Albanians had phones. They probably thought he was a Turk and they didn't bother him.

He went to Prizren and left me his keys. He was one of those three or four Albanian families in that apartment building. So, time after time I would go up to the highest floor and call... there were Montenegrin neighbors in my brother's apartment, where I come from, from Plava-Gusia, and we were friends.

His uncle, during the Second World War, he was one of the generals of the army who was called the National Liberation, but Montenegrins were naturally surrounded by Chetniks and Albanian volunteers on the other side, he surrendered to Albanian volunteers. Where, an uncle of mine takes him under protection and takes him to that part, to the territory... the properties we had on the border on the other side of Albania, then the border didn't exist, almost.

And I mean, we saved that man, so he had a moral obligation to treat me well, and, to be honest, he was there for me. He also brought me food for me, my niece and her family. The phone, how do I say, it was available to Lirak so that they could talk to me by satellite phone and to my brother and nephews I had in America. They called me on his phone and I spoke.

Of course, even though we had this friendship and previous acquaintance, I didn't tell them about Lirak being on the front. I said... I thought I deceived them, but you will see that something unexpected happened in the end. I told him, "Luckily, thank goodness my son and his wife and children went to Macedonia, to Struga and now he is safe, who cares what happens to me."

He didn't say anything until the day when the Russian forces came, June 10 or 11, and the Serbs and Montenegrins who were left here, because there were only a few Albanians left, there were a lot of shootings in Prishtina. Honestly, I thought they started bombing Prishtina.

They shot at all the windows. The Montenegrin was really scared, my brother's apartment was next to his. He said, "Zenun, save me..." he said, "What is happening?" We didn't know. He said, "UÇK got into the city." Of course I assured him that I would protect him until the end. We sheltered, we laid down, we didn't know what was happening.

He laid down there and I said, "I don't know if I'll be able to protect you." He said, "I know you can because your son is in the frontline." So he had known all along and hadn't said anything. My niece, she usually went out to get bread. Although, we created, in those first days when the Albanians could still move and be served in shops, because now there were only Serbs in the shops, what was left.

She went out to buy bread, we would bake it and put it in the fridge, it was, how do I say, something we learned in Sarajeva, that baked bread should be stored in cold places, and how do I say, to be used rationally, not freely.

So, we had reserves. It was us, and another family, he is also from Llap, a lawyer, Qazim Qerimi, him and his wife were stuck here, but luckily his daughters were able to leave on the first days. They went to Macedonia, they lived there. While another friend, Nehat Islami, he also had two daughters. He was also very happy when he was able to get his daughters out of here. So, sometimes he would come and visit me because we were near, I didn't leave the apartment, but he did.

Military vehicles, Serbian or Yugoslav army tanks were parked in the shelters of the balconies, around the multistory buildings, and they didn't move, they waited. Of course, they were waiting for that moment to be on the counterattack. Thus they managed to preserve both their military technique and not to get severely damaged themselves. They left the airport during the bombing, of course the bases they had in Golesh and at the top of Gërmia.

After the war, I saw that when I went out to walk in Gërmia, they had entered through... they had made shelters on the ground, so they were expected for the ground forces to enter even there. These were, how do I say, so we got information about who was left from who moved around. We found out, for example, that in the early days... that Bajram Kelmendi and his two sons were killed, that Bajram's wife, Nekibja, who is now deceased, had her sister nearby. Her sister moved around, unrestricted, near there.

My niece had met her and found out he was killed. Of course, I couldn't go, I couldn't even go to his funeral, but I found out... because weirdly enough Adem Demaçi was at his funeral, he went out in public openly, gave declarations on Serbian televisions of Belgrade. He spoke against them fearlessly, without any restrictions. Fehmi Agani was also there, and another 20-30 people, his family, they were at his funeral in Dragodan, Arbëri as we call it now.

Meanwhile, other killings took place in the city, but not on a large scale as they did in Drenica and other parts of Kosovo. There were some individuals here in Prishtina, I remember one, it was, now I can't remember his name... they actually killed him on the last day when the bombing was ending. Then I found out that a university professor had died and they couldn't take him to the cemetery and

they buried him in the yard, Peja, a professor at the Faculty of Law. So, this kind information circulated, we knew approximately who was left in the city.

Zekerija Cana, he was also an activist, historian, researcher at the Albanological Institute. He had also collected notes on who remained and wrote a book on who remained until the end in Prishtina. Even some intellectuals here and there, but all of them were closed, all of them were isolated, because there was a fear that if they met us we would end up badly.

Like this the famous June 10 that practically brought peace came, the Kumanovo Agreement. Of course, all night we listened to the news on the radio, transistor, like this, we followed what was happening, there were reports from the war fronts, from different parts of Kosovo. They sent messages to *Zëri i Amerikës*, *Europa e Lirë*, *Deutsche Welle*, *Radio Tirana* and from there we understood what was happening outside.

To tell you the truth until late... because there was news that Velania was burned to the ground. But, in the meantime, Lirak, as I said we talked on my neighbor's phone, I told them I was talking to my brother in America, who he knew. He told me that the UÇK was sending people to observe the situation, people who came to the city to see the situation, to know what the situation is like and how to proceed.

He told me that there were no burned down houses in Velania, it's just as we left it. Other things also happened. One night, for example, around 02:00-03:00 in the morning, the door rings. The halls didn't have lights and we didn't know who it was. I, to tell you the truth, prepared to die because I had heard that this is how they took people and killed them.

And, when my brother was here, he had a gun and I always kept it with me. I always thought at least I would get revenge myself. With that gun in my hand, but I didn't open the door fully because it had a chain, we fixed it so it wouldn't open fully. I opened it, it was a naked woman, she talked as if she was crazy, sometimes in Albanian, sometimes in Serbian and, "Open the door so I can get inside." But I didn't know what was happening, I was scared it could be a provocation by Serbia so they would set me up as if I had raped her or who knows. People think of many things in those moments, so they would have a reason to kill, with this shame. I didn't open the door.

I told my niece, "Let's give her some clothes." I gave her the clothes, she got dressed, I don't know what she did after that. We looked through the window, there were lines of cars of people who passed there, because the apartment had the view of the street towards University Clinical Centers. Lines of tractors, horse-drawn carriages, cars, long lines, but we didn't know where they were going or... we knew they were leaving Kosovo. All this, of course, created that feeling of the lack of a future, of a fear that a bomb would explode somewhere near us, to take revenge on someone, we didn't have opportunities, we were unprepared and so on.

And so we waited for the last day of the bombings. I went sometime around 80 days, 78 days to see the house, the streets were empty, no one was here, so from Ulpiana to Velania. I tried to find secondary streets where... though the Muhaxheri neighborhood and so on. I only met three people and they didn't know where they were going. When I went to the house I tried to open the door and see what happened inside, but I couldn't open any of the doors. Then I found out that one of the neighbors had nailed the doors shut a few days after they threw us out, so they wouldn't go in easily. They had taken the car I had in my garage, a Gold 2, which at the time was a very nice car.

The yard was covered in grass, bad weed, or how is it called... but then without thinking of course, I tried to get inside to see the house. There could have been mines set up, or something, but I didn't think about it then. So, the NATO forces came. First the British came to where Ibrahim Rugova's tomb is, they came with a helicopter. Of course, they walked with automatics in their hands, they were very careful. They kissed people here and there who were still in Kosovo (cries), very sad scenes (cries).

Part Nine

Zenun Çelaj: They hugged them (cries). The next day Serbs were leaving. The soldiers as always with their provocative greetings {shows with his hands} with three fingers¹⁹. While the soldiers who were coming to Prishtina stopped Albanians from doing anything, killing... although that happened during the first or second day when the Atlantic Battalion came, Albanians who came from America.

They manifested more aggression, and some killings happened, they killed Serbs. I think they also killed some policemen, as far as I know. I don't exactly know the statistics because back then we couldn't keep notes. Even though as a writer, activist of the Human Rights Council, I was better prepared for this mission, but I didn't do it. There was nowhere to drink coffee. There was only one place, one coffee, a Gorani, he was Muslim, but he was allowed to work even during the bombing.

There at Zahir Pajaziti Square, so, he couldn't give them, how do I say, he couldn't fulfill even one of a thousandth of the requests to drink coffee. Grand was still in the hands of, under the control of Serbia, who we later learned that they all were Serbian security. A friend of mine from Gjilan, Ibrahim Osmani, also a journalist, he had also stayed in the basement of his house in Gjilan because there were fewer actions by the police and the army.

But since he also was one of the people who was isolated in 1989, also prosecuted because of the strike in Trepça, he didn't leave the house. I barely convinced him to go inside Grand and see what's inside. We went inside and the staff only spoke Serbian. We spoke Albanian they said, "We don't understand you." We replied, "You will understand." They also started to get scared, to be more reasonable, softer.

¹⁹ The three finger salute, made by using the thumb, index and the middle finger, is also known as the Serbian nationalist salute.

In the meantime, people who had fled to Macedonia and Albania began returning, they were coming to Prishtina continually. UÇK, those from Llap entered Kolovica because KFOR and NATO forces didn't allow them into the city. They weren't allowed to come, wherever they saw them with weapons, they would take the weapons. So, they stopped at Kolovica. Some of them even took off their uniforms so that they could move around the city. But, in order to avoid those tendencies, they stopped at Kolovica, in one of the factories there, Slovenia Les was one of the, I think, a department there. And like this...

Aurela Kadriu: Did you know what was happening to Lirak then?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, he had come with the unit, with with... from Llap here in Kolovica. I didn't know he had come but a friend of mine, the brother of one of my friends, I think I've mentioned him, Osman Dumoshi, he had gone there and met them. He came, he had looked for me everywhere. He found me through our friends and told me that Lirak was in Kolovica. So I went there with my other friends. I saw him after seven-eight months, nine. He hadn't been in Prishtina since September. It was a very emotional meeting of course, I also felt proud that he was (laughs), to tell you the truth...

Aurela Kadriu: When did he tell you that he wanted to go? That he wanted to join the UÇK?

Zenun Çelaj: When did he tell me?

Aurela Kadriu: Yes.

Zenun Çelaj: Well I was sick and he said, "Our people can come and get you." I was really sick. I explained it to him. I was scared to go there, to be a burden, to have to take care of me and my health. Who cares, I would die here, some would survive there and they won't have to worry about me. So I refused. Even if I fled, because I had the opportunity to leave Kosova with the people who were leaving. It was a mess there, the trains were full, we had the information. But to tell you the truth I felt weak. If I were to leave, in '99 I was almost 40 years old, while my son was here fighting. So, I decided to not leave Prishtina.

Aurela Kadriu: I asked you how did you receive the news that he was joining the UÇK?

Zenun Çelaj: I wasn't in Prishtina, I was in America. I was at my brother's house, my sister was also there and I was coming back. I was thinking of going to London, where my other son is, but he called me from here and said, "I sent my children and Ilire to Struga, I'm going where men go." I was afraid that as a son born and raised in the city he wouldn't be able to handle war. I said, "War isn't like the movies," because he is an actor, "It isn't like a movie, it's something else. Did you think this through?" "I thought of everything," I said, "It will be more embarrassing if you flee from the war, rather than not going at all. Because you are..." He was the most delicate from all my children. All his life, how do I say, with art, with culture, worked on the computer. I said, "Think about it hard. If you leave the war, if no one kills you, I will." He said, "I have thought about it, don't worry."

I returned to Prishtina, to be here at least until the bombing started. Not that we were expecting the bombing, we were expecting the massification of the UÇK and to turn into a general war, but it happened as it happened. It was luck for us, I don't know how to say it, as if God had blessed us that NATO came to our aid, who knows how long that situation would have lasted. This is how it ended.

Aurela Kadriu: How did life after the war continue?

Zenun Çelaj: After the war were these efforts for revival, the return of institutions, of power. KFOR took control of security, creating, how do I say, an international power practically, which divided the powers. Some, UNMIK and the institutions of justice, the others, the OSCE, education... so the power and legal changes, executive and others, but the power given to the Albanians was only formal or the core of a power that would be formed later, that we would have the prerogatives, the authority at the time that they would leave.

As can be seen, this power is not yet complete, no matter how much time has passed. How long had it been? 19 years. We also tried to get the newspapers published. I went, because at that time they had not left yet... so after two days or three days, I went to *Rilindja*, where the newspaper's editorial office was. And now the whole Press Palace, the printing house, was under the control of a company that Belgrade had created, which was called Panorama.

They had placed a journalist from *Jedinstvo* as head of everything, of course, I knew him, his name was Vujović. He had entered the office of the editor-in-chief, the director of *Rilindja* of the newspaper we were before. I went with two or three other journalists of *Rilindja* who had stayed here and said, "As you can see, your time is over, we will not treat you the way you treated us." Because they really treated us badly. They didn't publish our newspaper, they expelled us from the offices with the Serbian forces.

I said, "We will not behave like that. Go back to your floor." They had a floor and a half there, "keep publishing the newspaper as you want with your own tools, we will not bother you if you leave voluntarily." He said, "We have to ask the people who are in charge. These are not... bargains that we can make among us." I, because I was, how to say, the oldest that I had stayed here and I had more competencies at that time, at the time when *Rilindja* was closed down, so to speak. Therefore, I gave myself the right to speak on behalf of *Rilindja*. *Rilindja* started to get published in Macedonia, in Albania and Switzerland. There were these newsrooms, I mean, we had some basis.

He said, "We'll talk again." I went there another two times, he didn't listen. Then soldiers from the Atlantic Battalion cast them out. But we couldn't get organized here, we didn't have money or anything, and at first we couldn't get the newspaper published quickly. Some others did it. Whereas me and Blerim Shala, Bardh Hamza who were from *Zëri*, which was also part of *Rilindja*, organized to look at the publication of another daily newspaper that we called *Zëri* and I was the first editor-in-chief. We published the first issue at the end of... because it required preparation, the frame with the preparations and the division. On December 30, does December have 30 or 31 days?

Aurela Kadriu: 31.

Zenun Çelaj: Then on December 31 and January 1. December 31, '99 and January 1, 2000 we published two experimental issues and then *Zëri* continued as a daily newspaper. We also got donations from international organizations from Brussels, the Netherlands, I don't know from where they helped us and the newspaper still exists. Then there was an explosion of publications by others also. *Koha Ditore*, *Kosova Sot* returned, which were also burned by the first Serbian forces of Milošević, *Bota Sot* which was also published in Switzerland, and an issue was published here. Then the other newspapers started.

Aurela Kadriu: Until what year were you at *Zëri*?

Zenun Çelaj: Until 2009.

Aurela Kadriu: Can you tell me about independence? Where were you?

Zenun Çelaj: For independence, in fact until 2008 for independence, I was at *Koha Ditore*. *Zëri* was being privatized, it was private but he was selling it, Blerim Shala who was the owner with Bardh Hamza. He gathered our editorial office and said, it was the end of August, he said, "You have salaries until October, I will pay you until October, after that it depends on the new owner of the newspaper".

One of the colleague's daughters was very sick, a disease she was born with, a narrow throat, she couldn't swallow food thicker than water, so, this kind of food. He had to spend money every month on his daughter's food that he bought either in Turkey or in Western Europe for 300-400 marks, euros. And he said to me, "I know, you are friends with Veton, with Flaka, can you talk to them if they can find me a job, because I don't know what I would do if we lose our job, but killing my daughter." I didn't blame him.

I went and told Flaka, she was very humanitarian. I told her the problem, she said, "Tell him to come tomorrow." He went to work there, but in the meantime, she said, "We wanted, me and Veton thought..." he said, "He wants to establish a portal, we thought about hiring you, we know you're very loyal to *Rilindja* and won't betray them. But in these circumstances, will you come?" And immediately said, "Yes." And I went there. It should be 2009, yes, yes 2009. Because when independence was declared in 2008, I was at *Zëri*.

Aurela Kadriu: What kind of a moment was that day specifically?

Zenun Çelaj: At the newspapers, we usually find out about some planned events before the public. We were prepared for this event of course. It was definitely the happiest news of my life. I don't know, it was joyful when KFOR entered because we were liberated. I wonder why our institutions didn't celebrate June 12 as the day of liberation, but they have set some other dates, because that was the actual day of the liberation of Kosovo.

It was unimaginable. You can see that even now I am emotional. The day independence was declared was very cold. Those who lived and experienced it remember it. The city was very crowded. Groups of singers from here and Albania. People... I have the feeling that everyone was ready to forgive each other's sins, debts, everything.

Almost everyone was in tears, of course, me more than others (laughs). There were threats from Serbia and Serbs that they would take action against this, but we had the guarantee of NATO and KFOR, so everything went well. Despite the protests in North Mitrovica and beyond, which were very violent. Unfortunately, there were also Albanians killed in that part, because it was not under our control as it isn't even today. So, even this date had its victims like many others over the years, over the centuries, the issue of independence and liberation over the centuries from the Serbs.

Aurela Kadriu: Were you at work that day?

Zenun Çelaj: Yes, I was at work and I worked with everyone else in an effort to have every detail of that day that marked history, certainly the brightest day of Kosovo. Kosovo's Independence was almost never projected as an idea of preoccupation, an idea of engaging people who have dealt with the national cause.

It was seen as a liberation from Serbia and unification with Albania and, of course, the declaration of independence was considered a transitional day until the unification with Albania. Because the flag that was declared had nothing in common with that symbol with which we had grown up in our dreams, open or secret, not only to us but also to the generation before us. The anthem was without lyrics, even today no one knows how to sing it, you have to be a musician to know how to sing those notes, because there are no words. And so on. This was that experience.

Aurela Kadriu: How does your life continue today? 60 years of experience?

Zenun Çelaj: In May of next year... because I was hired in *Rilindja* as a journalist on May 25, 1960. Back then they even hired during dates that were holidays. May 25 was Youth Day at that time, the Youth Day was, how do I say, Tito's birthday, which at that time we celebrated, not with much enthusiasm but still celebrated. On that day, after my training to become a journalist, I was informed that I was accepted. They told me before, but I didn't consider myself good enough to be in journalism, but a friend of mine, I think I told you, wrote my request letter, forced me to and I became a journalist and I have been one for 60 years. Almost 60.

It's a very interesting profession, of course, if you like it. It is a profession that offers pleasure. It has its own diseases, man is first and foremost curious, to know everything but above all before others, this is what journalism offers. Then everyone wants to be known by others, journalism offers this because you are a person who is at a newspaper or on television, back then on the radio, when there was no television, your name opens doors to be honest.

I have never taken advantage of the privileges offered by journalism, I know I have, I had the opportunity to open doors wherever I wanted thanks to my profession, my name. Now, not every journalist has this privilege. As a profession, it takes courage to really be the voice of the citizens who have no voice, who have no ears, I'm talking about the ordinary citizens, who are not in a position to speak, because they are not politicians, they are not journalists who write and say what they think or say on the radio or television.

Journalism has this role, so, to become the voice of the voiceless and the deaf. And now mastery is to be one of those voiceless people who have something to say, who speak on behalf of those who have a lot of worries, who have a lot of ambition, a lot of vision, this is what journalism offers. That is why it is the more popular, more well-known.

Aurela Kadriu: Uncle Zenun, if you don't have anything else to add, I would like to thank you for your time, it was a great pleasure.

Zenun Çelaj: I hope I offered what you wanted. I told you I have a problem communicating while speaking, especially with a mic and camera because I'm used to writing, not talking.

Aurela Kadriu: Thank you very much.