

## INTERVIEW WITH AVDI DINAJ

Mitrovica | Date: October 28, 2021

Duration: 61 minutes

Present:

1. Avdi Dinaj (Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. Korab Krasniqi (Interviewer)
4. Renea Begolli (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

**Anita Susuri:** Mister Dinaj, could you introduce yourself? Your birth year, date, place, anything about your family, your origin?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes, my name is Avdi Dinaj, I was born on April 15, 1952, in Raushiq village, Municipality of Peja. I have finished elementary school in Raushiq, the gymnasium<sup>1</sup> in Peja, and the Faculty of Law in Pristina. I come from a village family, my parents were not educated, they had nine children. They had an appreciation for education, they also managed to provide education for six of them [children] who finished university, through agricultural work.

After my studies I attempted to find a job at Peja’s Court. But, then, the late Riza Loci, who was the Head of Peja’s District Court, knowing our whole family, said to me, “Knowing that your brother was a political prisoner,” who was sentenced to four years in prison, which [sentence] he did in Goli Otok<sup>2</sup> for political reasons, he [Riza] said, “even if you start working here, they won’t let you continue. The chances are very small, so in order to not leave a trace, go somewhere else,” even though Peja needed jurists at the time.

And then I went to Mitrovica by chance, without knowing anyone. It was my fate that on December 1 of 1976, after six or seven months of unemployment, I started as an intern in the Municipal Court of Mitrovica. But back then, the work of jurists was watched over by the highest bodies [in the Secret Police] in Mitrovica. And after three months, the former Head of the Municipal Court told me, “Submit your request to become a judge.”

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<sup>1</sup> A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

<sup>2</sup> Island in the north of the Adriatic sea, from 1949 through 1956 a maximum security penal colony for Yugoslav political prisoners, where individuals accused of sympathizing with the Soviet Union, or other dissenters, among them many Albanians, were detained. It is known as a veritable gulag.

There were many interns at the time, from those [interns] they chose three of us to apply [for a full-time job]. Around March 30 of 1977, I was chosen a judge in the Municipal Court of Mitrovica. After a while I got married, here, with a Mitrovican. I worked for around seven years as a judge in the Municipal Court. I was married at the time and I had three children. By request, an apartment was given to me by the Executive Council of the Municipal Assembly in Mitrovica. And then I remained in Mitrovica.

Later, at the request of the Court's Head, due to the lack of staff, from '84 or '85 I started to work as a judge in Mitrovica's District Court. [I worked] Until '92, when the Assembly of Serbia fired us, almost all Kosovo citizens. The next time period, I worked as a lawyer until 2000. In 2000, I came back as a judge in Mitrovica's District Court. Then, in 2002, around November 11, I was chosen as a judge in Kosovo's Supreme Court in Pristina where I worked until retirement.

My childhood was difficult just as... besides the five acres of land that we worked on, we had no other source of income. But, there was a strong willingness for education, my oldest brother Sylë Dinaj started it [education], who has now passed away. He was a student of Peja's gymnasium. Also, when he got to the third, fourth year of gymnasium, he wasn't a regular student, but part-time; he was imprisoned politically.

**Anita Susuri:** What year? Do you know in what year?

**Avdi Dinaj:** In 1962. Then he was sentenced to about four years in prison, which he did in Goli Otok. Since he was the oldest brother and our family's right arm, our financial situation got difficult. While he was in prison, I was maybe a fourth grader in elementary school. After returning from prison, he continued his education. But, he was very lucky that they didn't take his right to education away because he was a political prisoner, and they could take his right to education away.

**Anita Susuri:** So why was he imprisoned? What was his activity?

**Avdi Dinaj:** They referred to it as hostile activity at the time. Political issues, there was a group of about 20 something people. And then he continued education after returning from prison. He finished the Faculty of Pedagogy in Gjakova, and I started my studies in Pristina. The financial situation started to improve since he [oldest brother] was working, he helped us through his income, on top of the agricultural products. So... it was a difficult life.

**Anita Susuri:** At the time when your brother was imprisoned, Goli Otok was an infamous place, so it was difficult. Do you remember if your family, your parents, were concerned? Of course they were concerned, but how did you perceive that as a child?

**Avdi Dinaj:** That was, it was like a bomb fell on our house. You know? He was the oldest brother and after my parents, he was the main caregiver in the family. But, after finishing his studies and getting employed, because he had to get a job at the time, he got a job in Dragash; because at the time they didn't allow him to be employed in the Peja area, since he was a political prisoner.

After working in Brodsanë [village] for about three to four years, as a teacher of Albanian language and literature. Someone from the well-known Mulliqi family was the elementary school director in Raushiq, and when he [director] saw that he [my brother] was traveling, he said, "Come, this year you will start working in Raushiq." And then he worked in Raushiq for some time and then as a teacher of Albanian in Loxhë, until his retirement. After I finished my studies, I got an apartment and I was married.

**Anita Susuri:** What was it like for you to come from the Peja district and settle in Mitrovica, how did your family deal with that?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Well at the time my income was average. I set aside one part for my own expenses, and I sent the rest of it to my parents because they had to provide education for my brothers and sisters who were attending school. Two of my sisters finished university, I had to help them until each of them started to work, to make a living.

**Anita Susuri:** When you settled in Mitrovica, I guess you sold your property there [in Raushiq] or how did that happen?

**Avdi Dinaj:** I didn't, we didn't sell anything, we didn't sell anything. Even today after separating from my brothers, I own about three acres of land where my cousins work. But, it's my property as inheritance.

**Anita Susuri:** I'll go back [in time] a bit, what was the time period of high school like for you?

**Avdi Dinaj:** It was very difficult, very difficult. Peja's gymnasium was about seven or eight kilometers away from the Raushiq village. Traveling for students was very difficult. The bus used to come and school started at about eight, there was only one bus and if you missed that one, you had to walk there. And the Peja to Deçan bus was packed {puts fingers together} with students. So, you couldn't wait for the next bus because you'd be late for school.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you ever miss the bus and had to walk there?

**Avdi Dinaj:** I never missed it, but there were times when the bus was packed and it didn't stop in Raushiq at all. And then all the group of students had to walk to Peja. The gymnasium and *Shkolla Normale*<sup>3</sup> especially, had a lot of students from that region.

**Anita Susuri:** So what was social and cultural life like, did you have places to hang out at, recreationally, or places to spend your time at, or cultural activities?

**Avdi Dinaj:** You could attend cultural activities only as a student. For example, at the time, if the teacher, the professor saw you in *korzo*,<sup>4</sup> that was a tragedy, let alone [if they saw you doing] something else (smiles). Life back then, especially that of students, was home to school, school to home. And then all the time spent until all six classes were held, then until you arrived home, you had to prepare for the next morning, to study, we didn't have the luxury to go out at night. And then we had to help the family with agriculture, with farming... life was difficult.

**Anita Susuri:** You mentioned that you finished high school in Peja...

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Yes, and then you continued in Pristina...

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes...

**Anita Susuri:** During this time period, did your family also move?

**Avdi Dinaj:** No, my family remained in Raushiq, but I... at the time the journey was only possible by train from Peja to Fushë Kosova because there was no highway like there is today. We traveled there by train, and then we settled in student dorms. I lived in the dorms during my studies.

**Anita Susuri:** What years were you a student?

**Avdi Dinaj:** I enrolled in university in '71-'72. I graduated on September 11, 1976.

**Anita Susuri:** What was Pristina like at that time?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Pristina was, I remember this, a student city. Pristina had about 36 thousand students at the time. Securing a bed in the dorms was a luxury for the students. There weren't as many dorms as

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<sup>3</sup> 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 the Second World War, these were the first schools in the Albanian language that Kosovo ever had. In 1953, the *Shkolla Normale* moved to Pristina.

<sup>4</sup> Main street, reserved for pedestrians.

there are today. Across from the Faculty of Law, there were these pavilions, further there were the dorms number 1, 2, 3 and the barracks. The street which is there today was under construction at the time. At first the canteen was, there was an old canteen across from the Faculty of Law where those pavilions were. And later the new student canteen opened up.

**Anita Susuri:** What was the city like at that time?

**Avdi Dinaj:** It was under construction, it was under construction. Those streets were under construction, the part across from the faculty there were pavilions, you know, with no...

**Anita Susuri:** No asphalt?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes, no asphalt, no...

**Anita Susuri:** Was it muddy?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes, the part of the Faculties of Law and Economics, the part of the amphitheater [classroom], back then it was already there. So, the conditions for the lecture were good. For example, in the first year at the Faculty of Law, the amphitheater used to be packed.

**Anita Susuri:** What were the professors like?

**Avdi Dinaj:** The professors were the first generation of professors, who established the Faculty of Law. Bardhyl Çausi,<sup>5</sup> then the Origins of Law [course], Rifat Osmani [professor]. Then there was the History of Law, taught by Hilmi Ismajli. Yes, they were the first generation of professors; the late Faruk Presheva, who was actually also a founder, one of the founders of the Faculty of Law. He was one of the best professors of civil law that Kosovo ever had. But, he taught almost all the courses at the time, both civil and criminal. In both Contract Law and Economic Law, he was an incomparable civil law expert, who will always be remembered.

**Anita Susuri:** Was it talked back then, for example, about the ethnicity of Albanians, about the position of Albanians in Yugoslavia? You as students, did you have any discussions?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes back then, at the time of the constitutional changes... actually we weren't a republic but a state, right? But, we had maximum freedom as students. When it came to cultural life, I was a big fan of the People's Provincial Theater at the time. There was no premiere, no drama that I didn't attend.

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<sup>5</sup> Bardhyl Çausi (1936–1999), lawyer and human rights activist, held in prison during the 1999 war and killed. His remains were only found in 2005.

**Anita Susuri:** What was it like to go to the theater back then? Some people used to say that you had to dress more special, to look a little more impressive?

**Avdi Dinaj:** At the premieres, we were lucky if we managed to secure a ticket. Because they were saved for the political elite of the time. If there was anything left for the students, then we could secure one.

**Anita Susuri:** What kind of shows were there, do you remember any?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes, there were the elite artists of the time, Melihate Ajeti,<sup>6</sup> Xhevat Qorraj,<sup>7</sup> Istref Begolli,<sup>8</sup> let me not mention all of them. But it was an extraordinary elite. And there was no premiere... show in the People's [Provincial] Theater that wasn't packed with people.

**Anita Susuri:** After graduating, you made the decision to return to Mitrovica, right? To your family that was in Mitrovica, right?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Excuse me?

**Anita Susuri:** Your family was in Mitrovica after you graduated...

**Avdi Dinaj:** No, no, [they were] in Raushiq.

**Anita Susuri:** Oh, so you made that decision after.

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes, with my parents' approval. I settled in Mitrovica with my parents' approval.

**Anita Susuri:** You mentioned that it was more difficult in Peja because of your brother and stuff...

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes...

**Anita Susuri:** And how did that happen, that change? You went from Raushiq to Pristina, then from Pristina to Mitrovica, how did you experience that change?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Well, separating from my family was difficult at first. But meanwhile, after getting my apartment, my wife worked in education, we bought a car at the time and we visited my family almost every weekend.

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<sup>6</sup> Melihate Ajeti (1935-2005) was a well-known Kosovo actress, among the first women to take acting professionally in Kosovo. Throughout her career, she played countless parts in theater and film.

<sup>7</sup> Xhevat Qorraj (1947) is a Kosovo actor.

<sup>8</sup> Istref Begolli (1933-2003) was a popular Kosovo actor hailing from an artistic family, which included Faruk Begolli.

**Anita Susuri:** What was work like during that time period?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Working as a judge was not easy, it's a difficult job, you know? A job with responsibility, but I loved my profession.

**Anita Susuri:** What kind of cases were there mostly?

**Avdi Dinaj:** In the Municipal Court, I worked on civil law for a time period, for about three years. And then one year in investigation, then I worked in criminal [law]. And it was '82 when I started working in criminal law, and I didn't stop working there until my retirement. But, depending on what was needed, I also had to work on civil law.

**Anita Susuri:** So what is the difference, since someone might not know? Between civil and criminal law.

**Avdi Dinaj:** Well criminal law...

**Anita Susuri:** What kind of cases are there for example?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Well, criminal law includes minor injuries, major injuries, murders, attempted murders, you know? Everything that is related to crime. Whereas civil law is about ownership issues.

**Anita Susuri:** So, during the time you worked, and you decided on that law, what... if you could elaborate a little more on that part?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes...

**Anita Susuri:** And what was working together with all the [ethnic] communities that lived here at the time, what was it like?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Well look, the communities were there at the time, as a judge of the District Court, honestly I was maybe lucky to be one, I judged cases, especially severe cases of murder and stuff, but no political cases. I don't know the reason [why they didn't give me political cases], maybe it was because of my family's history, but I didn't have political cases. I had two or three political cases at most. Among them, it was also the investigations of the miners' case.

**Anita Susuri:** Before going there, I want to talk about '81 when the demonstrations<sup>9</sup> happened, what was that time period like?

**Avdi Dinaj:** I was a soldier [conscription] in '79, '80, '81. In '81 all of Kosovo was involved in the demonstrations, but it wasn't easy.

**Anita Susuri:** In what year did you return from the army?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Excuse me?

**Anita Susuri:** In what year did you return from the army?

**Avdi Dinaj:** 1980.

**Anita Susuri:** '80, yes. And then you continued work right after?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes, right after.

**Anita Susuri:** I'm interested to know if you had any cases related to the events ['81 demonstrations] that took place, any students or somebody?

**Avdi Dinaj:** You mean to judge?

**Anita Susuri:** Yes.

**Avdi Dinaj:** Nope.

**Anita Susuri:** You didn't have any?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Nope, I didn't have any.

**Anita Susuri:** So what was the atmosphere like at that time, do you remember the days when the demonstrations happened?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Well it was a gloomy atmosphere... you know? We saw the youth clashing with police, it's not easy, they were actually our children.

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<sup>9</sup> On March 11, 1981, a plate was broken at the student canteen expressing dissatisfaction with poor student conditions, after which many students joined flipping tables. The event sparked a widespread student-led demonstration. The demand for better food and dormitory conditions was emblematic of the Albanian demand for equal treatment in Yugoslavia.

## Part Two

**Anita Susuri:** You wanted to talk about the miners' case, if you could now explain how that all happened, how... when you heard the strike was happening at first, how did you feel?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes I know, back then, back then the miners' strikes started...

**Anita Susuri:** First there was the march...

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes...

**Anita Susuri:** And then they were interrogated.

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes, there was a march, the walk to Pristina to voice political issues. And... you remember, they demanded the resignation of...

**Anita Susuri:** Rrahman Morina<sup>10</sup>...

**Avdi Dinaj:** Hysamedin Azemi, and these other people. But, I watched those cases on TV at the time. But when the investigative procedure started I remember it like it was today... it was, if I am not mistaken, it was March 13, '89. After work, I went to my apartment. In the late hours of the night, the former head of the District Court Kapllan Baruti had sent his chauffeur to drive me with his car. I asked the chauffeur, I said, "What's up?" He said, "The Head of the Court wants to see you."

Kapllan was an extraordinary man, extraordinarily good. He invited me to his office. He said, "I am asking you to take on Vllasi's case..." he told me this and that and how he is being brought in from Bijeljina, and that they want to start investigative procedures. The prosecutor had already filed the request to start the investigations. Counterrevolution, counterrevolution back then was the highest sentence, 20 years for counterrevolution or death sentence. I know that we discussed it with Kapllan, he said to me, "Please take over the investigation." I said, "Kapllan, I don't want this case to cost me my job. I will not take over. Until now I never investigated political cases, I don't want to do it now."

As the conversation progressed, he said, "If you don't take it over, we have to give it to someone else and lose access to the case." I know I said to him, "Give it to whomever you like, do whatever you like. Not me." In order to change my mind, he called Tadej Rodiqi. While discussing with Tadej Rodiqi he

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<sup>10</sup> Rrahman Morina (1943-1990) had a career as an agent of the Ministry of Interior of SFR Yugoslavia, and later on as a party official in the League of Communists of Kosovo. He rose through the ranks and was in 1981 appointed as Kosovo's interior minister, and thereby held the top law enforcement office in the province.

said to me, he said, “It’s not by accident that we talked about taking you as an investigative judge.” And he told me his history. Among other things he said, “Avdi, in the case of Marie Shllaku,<sup>11</sup> my brother was a prisoner together with Marie Shllaku. When he was released from prison, he only lived for three months because they destroyed him.” He said, “If we don’t put a stop to it this time, when do you think to, to, to...”

One request after the other to take on the case, I agreed to do the investigation. There was nothing you could do about detention because at the time with the law of criminal procedures, when it comes to criminal acts for which the death penalty is considered, detention was mandatory. I started the investigation, I took [Azem Vllasi](#), Aziz Abrashi,<sup>12</sup> and [Burhan Kavaja](#) into questioning. Then we broadened our scope of investigation. Fifteen of them were accused.”

**Anita Susuri:** What kind of questions did you ask them because the accusation was counterrevolution, but what was the foundation?

**Avdi Dinaj:** The foundation was those demonstrations. The foundation was the demonstrations, but it was known that it’s a political case, a euphoria of the moment, because they got released, you know?

*[The interview was interrupted here]*

**Avdi Dinaj:** At first the investigations started against Azem Vllasi, Aziz Abrashi and Burhan Kavaja. They were taken in for questioning in the capacity of defendants. The most eminent lawyers of the former Yugoslavia were engaged in that investigation. One of them was the late Bajram Kelmendi,<sup>13</sup> a lawyer for whom there will hardly ever be a match in the Albanian territories. There was Rajko Danilović from Belgrade, Drago Demšar from Zagreb, Vesta Pesić from Slovenia. You know what? It was the elite of the lawyers from that time.

**Anita Susuri:** So why was it like that? Was this a really important event that...

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes it was... actually it shook the core of Yugoslavia, as they used to say back then. And I interrogated Vllasi, I remember it like it was today... because a group of jurists sent from Belgrade worked for the prosecution team, I remember it like it was today. Besides having the support of my colleagues, I also had the Head of the Court, Kapllan Baruti, and Tadej Rodiqi, whom I consulted with. I

<sup>11</sup> Marie Shllaku (1922-1946) was an Albanian nationalist and political activist, involved in the resistance against the Communist partisans. She was executed by a firing squad in 1946 after a 13-day mock-trial.

<sup>12</sup> Aziz Abrashi (1938-2014) was an economist, who led many important socially-owned enterprises. He was the general director of the Trepça Enterprise and led the enterprise during the most difficult period of the Miners’ Strike 1989, where he was fired and sent to prison for 14 months together with other miners.

<sup>13</sup> Bajram Kelmendi (1937-1999) was a lawyer and human rights activist. He filed charges against Slobodan Milošević at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in 1998. On the first day of the NATO war in 1999, Serb police arrested him with his two children Kastriot and Kushtrim. Their bodies were found the next day.

even remember in one case during the interrogation we took a short coffee break. I was questioning Vllasi, he said, “I could use a coffee...”

**Anita Susuri:** Vllasi?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes. And I didn’t think twice about it and ordered him a coffee. I was young back then, I didn’t think of stuff like that. I ran into Kapllan in the corridor by chance, he asked, “So, are you taking a break?” I said, “Yes, we’ll get coffee.” He asked, “Did you order one for Vllasi too?” I said, “Yes, why not *bre*?”<sup>14</sup> He said, “Wait.” He informed Tadej, just to... He said, “These coffees...” Back then the coffee cost 20 cents at court. He said, “These coffees are paid through the court’s account.” I said, “Why through their account?” “Leave it...” We got coffee, and when we wanted to continue, Spaso saw that Vllasi got coffee, and he asked to extend the break. That coffee became a very big deal, all the [court] bodies found out that he ordered a coffee in the office (smiles). This was considered... even though legally, the defendant had the right to a break, they have their rights which... But since it was a political group it was as if...

**Anita Susuri:** So what was it that they talked about, what kind of answers did they give you?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Well they talked about the events of the demonstrations back then. If they were... because Vllasi visited the miners in the cavern, and then they assumed that Vllasi, with Aziz Abrashi as a general director of Trepça, and Burhan Kavaja as a director of the mine with flotation Stari Trg, organized the workers to go on strike and to enclose themselves in the caverns. But they didn’t argue with evidence that there was some sort of organizing, it was the discontent as a result of the political circumstances of that time.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you realize that, or did you also suspect that maybe they have organized them [the miners]?

**Avdi Dinaj:** The role of the investigative judge is to record what they say, you understand?

**Anita Susuri:** Yes.

**Avdi Dinaj:** To be as accurate as possible about their statements.

**Anita Susuri:** You mentioned that during that time you were constantly followed.

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<sup>14</sup> Colloquial: used to emphasize the sentence, it expresses strong emotion. *Bre* adds emphasis, similar to the English bro, brother.

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes, since I took on the investigations, actually as soon as I left my apartment with my wife and children I noticed them, the State Security<sup>15</sup> back then, their people followed my every step. For six months as long as I was working on the investigations, it was impossible to not be followed. Not only me, but also my other colleagues, especially the Head of the Court [Kapllan Baruti]. Also, I actually couldn't say anything in my office because we suspected that they [State Security] had placed listening devices.

**Anita Susuri:** You also told me that you kept in touch [with people interested about the case] and that the meetings took place in Zhlep village?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes. But I never met the people that were interested in Mitrovica. I took my wife and children... The ones that wanted to, politicians, people from that time that wanted to talk with me about the case... I went there because during the summer our family went to the mountains. And I held the meetings there. There were people that were interested about the case and I informed them about every detail there.

**Anita Susuri:** What kind of details for example? About how the [investigative] procedure is going?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** And what were the [court] sessions held for these 15 people like?

**Avdi Dinaj:** There were no sessions, they were taken in for questioning one by one in the office, in the presence of lawyers. At first they gave their statements, and then, with the proposal of the prosecutor, they were asked to provide an explanation about the evidence. All the defendants chose silence, they didn't give a statement. I only questioned the defendants, while the witnesses were questioned by the State Security. There was an appointed prosecutor, Rexhep Kačaniku, who questioned them [the witnesses]. But there was no input by the investigative judge on the credibility of those witnesses. They called them [the witnesses] without the knowledge of... we were aware, but they called them without the input of the investigative judge.

I know when the trial started, the late Ismet Emra returned as Head of Court, he used to be presiding judge. During the hearing, the lawyers asked to single out the statements of the witnesses, even though there wasn't anything important in these statements, they asked to single them out because the investigative judge didn't believe them. They called me, they said, "You were the investigative judge, is there any decision to entrust you with the hearing of the witnesses from the [State] Security?" I said, "There isn't." They asked, "Why?" I said, "Because they didn't request one and there isn't one."

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<sup>15</sup> The State Security Service - *Služba državne sigurnosti*, also known by its original name as the State Security Administration, was the secret police organization of Communist Yugoslavia. It was at all times best known by the acronym UDBA.

But, it was good luck. I remember when the verdict was announced, Nekibe Kelmendi was in my office, when they were released from jail. It was a pleasure when...

**Anita Susuri:** So you weren't present in the courtroom?

**Avdi Dinaj:** No, I only did the investigations. I didn't even have the right to be a member of the trial panel or judge the case.

**Anita Susuri:** Most of them, especially Burhan Kavaja, told us that they didn't anticipate being released. So it was surprising for them.

**Avdi Dinaj:** They...

**Anita Susuri:** Did you also share these thoughts? What was your opinion about that, did you think they'd be sentenced or not?

**Avdi Dinaj:** In my opinion, every detail I didn't know is clear to me. My opinion was that there is no evidence. There was no evidence because they took the testimonies of around 119 witnesses. Each and every time, those statements came to me first. There was no evidence. It's something else when there's no evidence.

**Anita Susuri:** When you did the investigations, do you remember the state these people were in? Were they scared or...?

**Avdi Dinaj:** *Uff* {onomatopoeia} they were concerned, they were concerned. They were... it was a gloomy time period for them as well because...

**Anita Susuri:** Do you have a specific example in mind that you would like to single out?

**Avdi Dinaj:** I remember like it was today, at the end of the investigations, Aziz Abrashi was not doing well and they asked me to go visit him in jail. I remember as if it was today, Spasoje and I went to visit them, both had asked us to visit them and we went straight from court to prison. The former prison ward was this guy Sherfedin Ajeti. Among other things, Spasoje said, "Should" he said, "Avdi pay a visit to prison during visitation hours," as if my investigations have failed. Though he knew that his investigations failed, "and secure him a separate room [with the defendant]?" I said to him, "I don't know, for me or for you?" Sherafedin Ajeti, said, "If he wins the case, of course Spasoje and I will need a separate room. If we win the case he will need a separate room." And that was quite a bitter joke.

Then, we went in to talk to Aziz Abrashi. I managed to convince him that this is an investigative case, it's a case about gathering evidence. "The evidence is gathered, there will be a review. Based on the

existing evidence, a decision will be made in accordance. But, you don't need to turn it into something tragic." So when the trial started, and it was a prolonged trial, besides judging there were a lot of jokes during the judicial review.

**Anita Susuri:** What kind of jokes for example?

**Avdi Dinaj:** What kind of jokes? Well the lawyers of that time were the elite of lawyers. Since I didn't directly witness it, I wasn't present, other people who were told me, especially [Adem Vokshi](#) and Faruk Korenica who are alive. There's also others, such as Xhafer Maliqi.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you meet [with any of the defendants] after there was a decision for these people, or how did it go?

**Avdi Dinaj:** I met Lazër Krasniqi after the verdict. I know because Lazër Krasniqi now lives somewhere in Otapia I think. He was the director of KEK.<sup>16</sup> When I started questioning them before the prosecutor and the lawyers came, he said, "Judge, can I ask you something?" I said, "Go on?" He asked, "Is Kapllan Baruti aware that I am in jail?" I said, "Yes." He said, "I don't need to know anything else."

After he got out of jail, when I met him later on, he showed respect. He told me, "Judge, I'm glad that I saw you." I said, "I'm also glad that..." He said, "Judge, at the moment you started questioning me I knew what side you were on." And I jokingly said, "Well, back then I wasn't a good investigative judge, because the party can't know what side an investigative judge is on, because the judge should be unbiased."

**Anita Susuri:** Do you remember what the day when they were released was like, because people have told us that it was like a celebration?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes, there were celebrations like it was a national holiday. I remember it like it was today when they were released from jail, even Bajram came, Bajram Kelmendi came to my office and Nekibe was already there because she was my teacher in elementary school. We watched it through the window, the people gathered, how do I... Not even national holidays were celebrated more.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you see them coming out?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes, because the jail is beneath the court and they had to walk by the court windows {describes with hands} and to go to the main street.

**Anita Susuri:** What did they seem like to you? Were they happy?

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<sup>16</sup> *Korporata Energjetike e Kosovës (KEK)* - Kosovo Energy Corporation.

**Avdi Dinaj:** Well look, getting freedom after around eight months, almost a year isn't...

**Anita Susuri:** What were the '90s like after? The political situation worsened and the other demonstrations started. What were those years like for you? Until what time did you work as a judge?

**Avdi Dinaj:** I worked until the beginning of '92 when all the judges in Kosovo were fired by the Assembly of Serbia. Until that time I worked as a judge, and then I switched to a lawyer.

**Anita Susuri:** How did they fire you? Did you expect it?

**Avdi Dinaj:** It was expected, if not today, then tomorrow. We expected it since the [early] '90s, when was it going to happen. I know because the unions had a role back then. Especially Bajram Kelmendi, he came and told us, "You have to stay until they fire you." And then they did, they fired all of the Albanians, they filled it with Serbs.

**Anita Susuri:** Did they bring other Serbian people or was it the ones you already worked with?

**Avdi Dinaj:** They were Serbian and Montenegrin staff here in Mitrovica. Two or three, one came from Čačak, a few others came from outside Mitrovica, the others were Mitrovicans.

**Anita Susuri:** How did the '90s go for you as a lawyer?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Well as a lawyer actually, the entire court was Serbian. We were (smiles) some of us, I had a case with about twelve defendants in the same date as the bombings, all free of charge, who [the defendants] were released after the NATO troops entered Kosovo. You had to be careful. We divided the cases, the ones of us working in law, some here, some there.

**Anita Susuri:** What was it like, I mean the beginning of the worsening of the situation and the beginning of war? What was that time like?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Well it was a gloomy time period. It was extraordinarily gloomy. For example, as soon as you finished work, you had to isolate yourself in your apartment. Anyways, you are young but there was *Dora e Zezë*,<sup>17</sup> they just took specific people and eliminated them and left them on the street. As soon as it got dark, you had to enclose yourself in your apartment until the next day.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you feel yourself at risk?

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<sup>17</sup> Alb. *Dora e Zezë*; Srb. *Crna Ruka*, in translation Black Hand, was a secret military society formed in 1901 by officers in the Army of the Kingdom of Serbia. It gained a reputation for its alleged involvement in the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914. Over the last hundred years, different Serbian military groups emerged under the same name. They are known for committing war crimes and often acting out of their own accord.

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes, of course. Not only me, but all of my colleagues felt themselves at risk. I remember it like it was today, I had a trial with Shyqri Sylja, a political case, and we told them [clients] to remain silent, to not give any statements and as soon as we finished the session I told Shyqri, “Don’t go to the office because the situation is bad.” I went to my apartment immediately after court, because my apartment was on the northern side [of Mitrovica]. I remember it like it was today, as soon as he went to his office to leave his briefcase, the police jumped him and... {describes with hands} the case was even reported for the violence against him.

**Anita Susuri:** Were you here during the war?

**Avdi Dinaj:** I wasn’t here during the war. My brother-in-law had a lodge near Ribariq, we went to spend the weekend there two or three days before the bombings. When the bombings started, you couldn’t get in or out of those lodges anymore. Then, I took my child and we left around April 8 [1999]. We crossed the border to Montenegro with a lot of difficulties. I stayed in Ulcinj until the NATO troops entered Kosovo.

**Anita Susuri:** What was the journey to Montenegro like?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Well, it was very difficult because where we were near Ribariq, the lodges were about two or three kilometers close, we couldn’t get in or out. We remained there until April 8 because we couldn’t enter or leave. Then we had a neighbor, we got on our way to Novi Pazar. There’s an access road. We went to Tutin [town in Serbia], there’s an access road that takes you to Rožaje [town in Montenegro], not the highway, but another road where there were no police and we got to Rožaje. From Rožaje, when we entered Rožaje it was something else and then we continued to Ulcinj, and I remained there till my return.

**Anita Susuri:** How did you take the news that Kosovo was liberated, that the war was over?

**Avdi Dinaj:** It was, freedom is coming. Is there anything more valuable?

**Anita Susuri:** How did you decide to return? In what state did you find your apartment?

**Avdi Dinaj:** I returned with the first line [of cars] that came from Ulcinj, it was June 23 of ‘99. Since the political situation in Montenegro was agitated. The police authorities of Montenegro, the line of Kosovo Albanians that were in Ulcinj became about three kilometers long. They didn’t let us go alone. The police were behind, the line of cars stretched until the Tower in Zhlep [village in Kosovo] and the Montenegrin police followed us.

**Anita Susuri:** And then when you arrived here?

**Avdi Dinaj:** When we arrived here...

**Anita Susuri:** First of all, what did Kosovo look like on your way to Mitrovica?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Well, everything was destroyed, every object was destroyed. My apartment was on the northern side. When I [went there], there were French troops. I didn't have another apartment. Then I had to stay over at my in-laws for some time until I made a solution about my apartment, that's it.

**Anita Susuri:** So, you could never return to your apartment?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Later you could only watch the apartment, but what was there to see. The apartment door was broken, all my stuff and books were stolen. I had an extraordinary professional collection of textbooks. Everything was taken, the furniture, it was demolished. And then Serbs settled in my apartment in the northern part and I couldn't use it anymore.

**Anita Susuri:** Now you found a solution right?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes I did find a solution.

**Anita Susuri:** You mentioned that you started working as a judge in 2000. How did that happen? How did you make the decision or did they call you?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Back then, at first, some emergency courts were formed in September which worked only with criminal cases and then I made a request at the beginning of 2000 and was chosen as a judge of the District Court. I worked until 2002. And then I applied to become a judge of the Supreme Court. In November of 2002 I was chosen a judge of the Supreme Court. I started working on January 11, 2003, I worked as a judge in the Supreme Court until my retirement in 2017.

**Anita Susuri:** What is life like now? You have a pension now right?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes, now I have a pension. I opened a law firm together with my son and daughter-in-law, all three of us are lawyers. We're living (smiles).

**Anita Susuri:** If there is anything you'd like to add or tell us about anything we didn't ask you about and you'd like to explain?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Well I wouldn't add anything more.

*[The interview was interrupted here]*

**Korab Krasniqi:** Mister Avdi I'll take you back in time just a little in '89 again. So, in '88 there was the march of miners from Stantërg to Pristina.

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes.

**Korab Krasniqi:** And then on February 20 the miners' strike began.

**Avdi Dinaj:** Yes.

**Korab Krasniqi:** And then some time around October or November of '89, I think it was October 7, I think there was a second strike inside the cavern. It was a smaller group of miners that isolated themselves for a shorter period of time, I think for four days. But, this was a little tougher, more violent and when the partakers of this strike were brought in, when they were interrogated, for example the case of mister [\[Ramadan\] Gjeloshi](#); He said that it was quite violent, quite difficult. Do you remember anything from this case?

**Avdi Dinaj:** No, I didn't deal with that case.

**Korab Krasniqi:** Did your colleagues tell you anything about it?

**Avdi Dinaj:** Look, they did, but I wouldn't like to interpret my colleagues' words.

**Anita Susuri:** Yes.

**Avdi Dinaj:** It's not adequate, it's not original.

**Anita Susuri:** Alright. Thank you for the interview and sharing your story.

**Avdi Dinaj:** I hope it came out well (smiles).