

## INTERVIEW WITH BAHTIJE ABRASHI

Pristina | Date: February 14, 2022

Duration: 122 minutes

Present:

1. Bahtije Abrashi (Speaker)
2. Anita Susuri (Interviewer)
3. 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:** Mrs. Bahtije, could you introduce yourself? Tell us something about yourself? About your family?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** I will introduce myself, but I want to also thank you for finding the time, and that you thought of me, because now I'm elderly. It will remain a document. Thanks a lot.

**Anita Susuri:** Thank you.

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Yes. I was born in Mitrovica on January 10, 1944. I was raised in a family, first of all, my dad was a miner in Trepça, he then fought in the National Liberation War, you know the Second World War. He was wounded. He has his war merits, and had he gotten another recognition, he would have become a national hero, holder of the '41 memorial. Maybe you, the youth... are not so informed, but now we have an opportunity. He... we were six children, our mother and father raised us in a revolutionary spirit. As a young girl, I have finished primary and middle school in Mitrovica. And then I registered at the gymnasium<sup>1</sup> of Mitrovica. After a month or two, the *Shkolla Normale*<sup>2</sup> opened close to the Mitrovica gymnasium.

My late father came and he told me, "My daughter, Mitrovica has opened a teacher's school," he didn't say *Shkolla Normale*. But he's like that... his eyes let me understand that he really wanted me to finish *Shkolla Normale* and to become a teacher. Because he was eager for education, because he didn't go to school but was self-taught. He learned how to read and write by himself. My mother as well. And so I tell him, "I will have to undergo the entrance exam again," "Don't worry, you will pass it." So he talked

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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> 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 the Albanian language that Kosovo ever had. In 1953, the *Shkolla Normale* moved to Pristina.

to the school principal, I took the entrance exam and I enrolled in... I switched to the *Shkolla Normale*. My friends and I, some of them are still with us, some aren't, finished the *Shkolla Normale* in Mitrovica, the first generation in Mitrovica.

But, during that time, I was also a youth activist, that's how I was brought up. I took part in many sports activities as well, I was a swimmer. Because Mitrovica was a, how do I say, an international city, we were all very engaged. In 1963, I got third place in swimming in Serbia. Maybe you will find it interesting, but since you asked me about my life. Yes. Soon after in 1964, I got married early. After getting married, I moved to Pristina together with my husband Aziz Abrashi. He finished university in Belgrade. He was a scarce professional in Kosovo, so he was drafted to Pristina immediately. But so was I along with him.

I was lucky to get a job at Emin Duraku Elementary School in Pristina. He moved to Kosovo's Chamber of Commerce. We started life there. I continued at the Pedagogical Academy in Pristina. And at the time there were some state-administered exams, how do I say, there was greater care shown to the teaching profession so we'd be more capable of educating future generations. Afterwards, like every mother, like every woman I gave birth to two kids: a son and a daughter. So I grew up together with them. They grew up, they became successful students. Then...

**Anita Susuri:** I would like to go back a bit because you mentioned some details that I am very interested in, starting from the fact that your father was a soldier in the Second World War. Do you have any stories related to the battles that took place? Or what brigade was he a part of?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** He was a part of the Shala e Bajgorës Brigade. He was wounded three times. They tried to capture him alive a few times, but they couldn't. They took his mother to prison, they burned his house down, they took his sister to prison, in the most notorious prison close to Mitrovica, Shipol. But, I don't know how he could go on... there were people that helped him and freed him from prison after I don't know how long. They did... together with the girl. The girl who was named Vahide, I don't remember because... as soon as he came back from prison, "Never," my mom said, "have I seen his eyes dry up from crying." He died with that anxiety and sorrow. So, the enemy could never capture him, they destroyed his family. So, it wasn't easy for him.

After the war he was very active in Mitrovica, he was a valued member of society, respected, he was also mayor of Mitrovica for a short period of time, until they found an educated person. But, he did his part.

**Anita Susuri:** What is your father's name?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** My father's name is Qazim Bajgora. His last name used to be Mehmetovic, earlier we had "vic" in our last names. And he wouldn't accept that last name, so he immediately changed his last name to Bajgora, because his village was Bajgora. So, he was a revolutionary man. We were six children: two girls and four boys. He educated us all. They used to give scholarships to the children of soldiers to get an education back then. There were obstacles back then too, they wouldn't give them

away. No child got a scholarship from the state. They had their reservations against him as well. My big brother finished university in Belgrade, the second one was an engineer in Mitrovica, the third one wanted to be a tailor, I, a teacher, the other sister finished the gymnasium, she worked as a translator for state agencies, a very good one, and my younger brother was an engineer as well. So, he educated us all.

**Anita Susuri:** You mentioned that your father worked in the mine...

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Yes, a miner...

**Anita Susuri:** What period was it? Was it before the war...

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Before the Second World War. He was a miner, he went to the National Liberation War from there.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you remember any story about how the mine was? To work in the mine? It must have been very difficult.

**Bahtije Abrashi:** The conditions have changed very little. The English had led the mine back then, there was the miner's strike against the English because they had exploited it, he participated in that. So, he was a revolutionary activist since he was young.

**Anita Susuri:** Can you tell us something more about the strike?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** The strike, as I said, was against the exploitation of the Trepça Mine by the English. They have always exploited it. And then Yugoslavia exploited it, but Yugoslavia did it in a more strategic sense, Serbia exploited it a lot. Back then, when those English people who used to work there returned, an elderly among them who came drawn to Mitrovica, he said, "We thought that even your side walks are paved in gold, what is this?" So, they exploited it so much, there was nothing left for us.

**Anita Susuri:** I wanted to ask you about your childhood because you were born during the Second World War, in 1944. As a child how do you remember Mitrovica? How was it? After the war...

**Bahtije Abrashi:** I will say this, so it will remain documented. I was born during the war and they were surrounded. My father came home to visit the children they already had, two sons, me, his mother, and my mother, you know his wife. And we had a cousin who was blind, but his listening abilities were quite advanced. And he noticed that someone was surrounding the house, he lived in the neighborhood and he notified them. For quite some time he was not at home because he had joined the Partisan ranks. He let my father know, he said to him, "They have surrounded your house."

My mother and father left their two sons home at night. They took me because I was an infant and they began to flee to some other village. But, I started to cry at night. When you cry on a mountain... it... my voice echoed. And they go, "Oh, we are done! They will find us due to the voice!" So on and so forth.

And they started having a dilemma, “Do we leave her in this tree hollow, or that tree hollow?” But they were parents, they couldn’t leave us. And at some point, as my mother told me, “You got tired, you shushed.” So, that tiredness saved me (laughs). There were, they had many difficult moments in their lives

**Anita Susuri:** Did you change residence as a child after the war or did they continue to live there?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** In Mitrovica. No, no, in Mitrovica. We did move, we first lived on this side of Ibër, on the side that they now refer to as southern, and then we moved on the northern side. But I remember my childhood, activities, and education on the northern side.

**Anita Susuri:** How do you remember Mitrovica? It was different from the other cities, because it was an industrial city. I mean, perhaps it was more developed than the other cities?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** In comparison to the other cities, it was more developed, more advanced. Many meetings took place there, in the Autonomous Province back then, every delegation that came here, came to Mitrovica. Trepça was the third biggest [industrial] giant in the Balkans, so it was interesting for everyone. So, whoever came to Mitrovica from the other cities... and then in high school we had the contacts, but even in elementary school we had contact as pioneers<sup>3</sup> with the other cities. They said, “Oh, it feels like going to another country. You guys are way ahead of us.”

The youth used to be much more engaged. We even had the Ibër [river] where we used to swim, we used to get into our swimwear and all. For others, for the other municipalities, for the other girls, for the youth that was a big surprise. There were balls and social evenings organized. There were many sports teams, sports meetings, and different games. So it was a very lively city. Even infrastructure was a little more developed, especially in the northern part of Mitrovica. Now I’m going into politics.

Since back then, once you crossed the Ibër Bridge, the old one, here it is in my room you can take a picture of it [addresses the interviewer], it was way more developed. By the Ibër river there was a, I remember as a child, they called it *Mahalla e Boletinëve*,<sup>4</sup> Boletin, Isa Boletin’s.<sup>5</sup> Then they demolished the whole neighborhood. And I remember when women used to talk to each-other, “*Kuku*,<sup>6</sup> they demolished the whole *Mahalla e Boletinëve*. They want to build over it,” I am saying it literally like they

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<sup>3</sup> The Union of Pioneers of Yugoslavia was the pioneer movement of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. All children of age seven and older attended an annual ceremony and wore uniforms, and were invited to become members of a group that shared certain values and culture. The organization was founded on December 27, 1942.

<sup>4</sup> Word of Arabic origin that means neighborhood. In the given context, the speaker describes a neighborhood that was in its entirety inhabited by the Boletini Family.

<sup>5</sup> Isa Boletini (1864-1916), an Albanian nationalist figure and guerrilla fighter. He was one of the leaders of the Albanian Revolt of 1910 the Kosovo *Vilajet* and became a major figure of Albanian struggle against the Ottomans and Serbia and Montenegro. His remains, originally buried in Podgorica where he was killed, were reburied in the village of Boletin, in the northern side of Mitrovica, in June 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Colloquial, expresses disbelief, distress, or wonder, depending on the context.

used to, “*Stanovi* [Srb.: apartments], apartments for *shkije*.”<sup>7</sup> At that time, they had known, they had some plan of theirs, and that’s what happened.

**Anita Susuri:** So, the city infrastructure started to change?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** The infrastructure in the city.

**Anita Susuri:** So do you remember the bridge? Was it demolished once, I think? And then it was built anew, right?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** I remember three bridges, and now this third one. The one I have on my wall is the one before the war, the iron bridge, it was solid... and then the bridge now which is impassable for the citizens. History. Close to the bridge it was, I have it in the photograph, the mosque which was 500-600 years old. They demolished it immediately during the war, it doesn’t exist anymore. They put concrete over the yard, the surface where the mosque used to be, it doesn’t exist, but it’s documented through photographs. There was an initiative to remove the concrete many times, to destroy it, to see what’s underneath, but they won’t allow it because it belongs to the northern part. Because there, as the people say, there are also bodies that they have buried whom their family are looking for. The women themselves documented it, the ones who lived in the building in front of it. It’s recorded, but the time hasn’t come...

**Anita Susuri:** During the last war?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** During the last war. But, maybe the time hasn’t come yet to open it and see what’s underneath.

**Anita Susuri:** I also wanted to ask you about your memory of your mother. You mentioned that she learned how to read and write by herself, she was self-taught...

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Along with my father.

**Anita Susuri:** What other memories do you have of your mother? What kind of woman was she?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Oh. This is where I get emotional, you understand. My mother was a woman, everyone praises their parents, but what I’m saying is the truth, she was a woman who raised six children and she didn’t know how to, she couldn’t help us with homework but she was attentive, “Get an education, study. Why aren’t you reading? Don’t you have homework?” Before the war, during the war, and after the war they wore a, they called it *ferexhe*,<sup>8</sup> they were covered, but now I don’t understand why they wear it like that, I will get into it now, with a *peçe*<sup>9</sup> in the front. The whole face

<sup>7</sup> *Shka* (m.); *shkinë* (f.), plural *shkijet*, is a derogatory term in Albanian used for Serbs.

<sup>8</sup> *Ferexhe*, a veil concealing the whole face except the eyes, worn by Muslim women in public.

<sup>9</sup> The front of the veil.

was covered, there were some handsewn holes at the eye area. But, the revolution started after the war and everything. It was decided that women should take it off, as they called it back then, *ferexhe*, so I'm calling it like that now too.

My mother, as the wife of a soldier, of a revolutionary, of a miner, [my father] he pressured her to take off the veil, the *peçe*. But, she was used to it, she felt uncomfortable, there was an inner conflict she had. "How do I take it off? And to become the first to take it off?" She went to her father and said to him, "Father, I am under a lot of pressure" and this and that, "From" of my late Father, "Qazim, to take it off." He thought of it and said to her, "Why not my daughter? If it's shameful, it's on him, if it's *sevap*,<sup>10</sup> it's on him. You should take it off." They've changed many things after the war.

Even in a big rally, I have the photograph, I have the article in *Zëri i Rinisë* [The Voice of Youth], she takes off the *ferexhe*, and she throws it up, she says, "I saw the light" (cries). It's in *Kosovarja* magazine, the journalist Nafije Latifi has her first-person testimony. So she even has the photograph when she... someone photographed her when she threw her *ferexhe* up and said, "I saw the light."

**Anita Susuri:** Since then other women started [to take their *ferexhe* off] too, right?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Yes and then the other women of course. Especially the wives of those who took part in the National Liberation War, people have also started to get education. But at that time, my dear girl, 95 percent of Kosovars were illiterate. I mentioned that both my mother and father are self-taught.

**Anita Susuri:** You mentioned some cultural and sports events that took place at that time and you mentioned that you were a swimmer.

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** Yes, was this a school extracurricular activity or was it a specific club?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** It was a specific club at the Mitrovica municipal level. The trainer was a man, he was even a Serb, Slavko Čebasak. First the pool was in Trepça, then in Stantërg, which the English built. We practiced there, that's where we held our training. And then it was built in Mitrovica in Zvečan, a little bit more modern, a little bit better. And then there. And then we started racing. The cities didn't have... we started racing in the Republic of Serbia with other republics. Yes, I would race in other republics as well, but I got married early (laughs).

**Anita Susuri:** In Stantërg, it's very interesting because the infrastructure no longer exists, it was demolished.

**Bahtije Abrashi:** It was demolished.

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<sup>10</sup> *Sawāb* or *Thawāb* is an Arabic term meaning "reward." Specifically, in the context of Islamic worldview, *thawāb* refers to spiritual merit or reward that accrues from the performance of good deeds and piety.

**Anita Susuri:** I'm interested to know what it looked like. Were there changing rooms?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Everything.

**Anita Susuri:** Were there multiple pools?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** With changing rooms, there was a pool and it was an olympic one.

**Anita Susuri:** Changing rooms as well.

**Bahtije Abrashi:** The English built changing rooms, sports fields and everything.

**Anita Susuri:** Up to what year have you practiced there?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** I have practiced there since '62, in '63 I was racing. The whole of '62 I was practicing swimming.

**Anita Susuri:** What were the trips you took like?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** A bus with miners used to go swimming in Stantërg. Because the miners had a bus, but then our trainer must have cooperated with them and we used to gather in Mitrovica at a specific time, and we would take off [with their bus]. We were, there were more Serbs, there were fewer Albanian girls, and it was like this.

**Anita Susuri:** Was there maybe prejudice against the girls that got an education or that...

**Bahtije Abrashi:** A very strong prejudice.

**Anita Susuri:** How did you feel for example, was that where it stopped...

**Bahtije Abrashi:** I felt okay because my Father was, as I said, thirsty for education. He was thirsty for the emancipation of Albanian women. I mentioned that 95 percent of the people were illiterate. So, it was a long-standing struggle. I, I'm recalling it now, I'm going back to myself, during the third grade of high school of *Shkolla Normale*, during the winter break we were assigned to go... I went to the Boletin village along with my late colleague, my classmate, Sanije, who has died. And they told us, "You will teach the illiteracy courses." We went to an *oda*,<sup>11</sup> there was a blanket with... my late father got on a horse and brought blankets, linens, pillows, he brought everything because we didn't have anything, they were very poor. The lady of the house used to sleep with us in the *oda* that men left to us.

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<sup>11</sup> Men's chamber in traditional Albanian society.



We taught illiteracy courses there. There was a group of maybe 30 brides and girls. Every one of them used to bring food. *Flia*,<sup>12</sup> *pite*,<sup>13</sup> cooked beans, maybe even potatoes because we had nothing else to eat. I feel like my greatest success in life was there. In 20 days, we taught them the 36 letters of the alphabet. We taught them how to read in syllables because until they remembered the next letter we used to tell them, “Prolong your vowels, because you will remember the letters soon enough.” So we taught them how to read in syllables as well.

We taught them how to count to a hundred, the four arithmetic operations, but we worked maybe even ten hours a day. And they would come eager to learn. It was winter, so they brought them on horses. Snow up to here {explains with hands}. But, they were eager to learn how to write, how to read. There were families that didn’t allow the girls to get an education, especially the girls. Priority was given to boys, not because they didn’t want to, but the economical situation dictated them to give more priority to the boys than the girls. But, it was difficult.

We went from house to house to convince them to bring their girls to school. Maybe sometimes we even told them, “We will sentence you. The state will sentence you if you don’t bring your girls to school.” After the war there was a very strong revolution for the emancipation of women.

**Anita Susuri:** What case... do you remember any case where the reaction of their parents, for example, was bad or maybe good?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Yes, they did react, “How do you send girls to school? When she goes to school, she will get spoiled, she won’t listen to us, they take the wrong path in life.” But we had to approach them in a diplomatic, humane, and warm manner and convince them it was not like that.

## Part Two

**Anita Susuri:** You told me that you then continued your education in Pristina?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Yes.

**Anita Susuri:** What was transferring to Pristina like for you? You started to live here I suppose?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Yes. I could say that it wasn’t a big change for me, I was young so I adapted very quickly. The staff of the people where I was employed welcomed me very warmly. So, I immediately acclimated myself to Pristina.

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

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<sup>12</sup> A traditional dish in Albanian cuisine consisting of crepe-like layers cooked with cinders under a lid.

<sup>13</sup> Albanian pie is a pastry made of a thin flaky dough such as phyllo or similar.

**Bahtije Abrashi:** It was an old city. The city was built up to the main traffic lights. When they started to build buildings over here, on the other side, we were surprised, we thought they went on building in the village. When the hospital in Pristina was built there was a strong backlash from the citizens, “Why are you taking us that far?” Now the hospital is in the center of Pristina. So, I, I remember even this area of the city where I live now as fields, landfills. I didn’t imagine it would develop this fast... I hope the youth enjoys it. It’s heartwarming when I go out and see the city.

**Anita Susuri:** What neighborhood did you live in?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** In Pristina, I lived in the center of the city of Pristina. My apartment was behind, what they used to call The Committee Building, for 15 years and then I moved to Goleshi Street for another 15 years. So, I lived in the city center for 30 years. Then I moved to Sunny Hill.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you ever go to, for example, did you have the time beside studying, to attend cultural events. For example, go to theaters or cinemas?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** We went to every premiere at the time and later. Especially my husband and I, and then when my children grew up I took them with me too, my friends as well. It was an important cultural dimension which all people anticipated with joy. If there was a premiere, we could barely find tickets. Yes, so the people progressed quickly.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you remember...

**Bahtije Abrashi:** We went to the movies regularly.

**Anita Susuri:** What kind of movies for example? What was going out like? Did people go out only to go to the movies, or did they go out in the city on their way to the movies? What was it like?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** No, no. We went to the movies to see maybe artistic or war films. There were a lot of Indian films. We went there, we liked the music, we went. But, while I worked in education, we regularly sent the children to the cinema. We chose which films, educational ones for the children. So, to instill the culture of watching films.

**Anita Susuri:** Up to about what year did you organize these kinds of activities with the school?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Well I worked in education until ‘79.

**Anita Susuri:** So, you regularly...

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Regularly. It was in the city center, close to the Pioneer Center, the one that is there, you youngsters, in front of the Television, the Radio Television of Kosovo, surrounded by those small stores, inside there was the Pioneer’s Center. The pupils’ activities were organized there on a municipal level, for all kinds of pioneers. There even was the Association of Ambassadors, in order to

teach children about different countries, the ambassadors. Perhaps it was for the pupils who were smarter, Ambassador of the USA, Ambassador of China, England, France, Germany. And then there was a debate, whether they wanted to or not, they got interested about the country they were representing.

So, we developed a culture so that in the future children, the pupils are better prepared. My apologies, I will make a comparison, there was a lot of work invested in education at the time. To work in education at the time, there were comparisons, to work in education they compared us, the good teachers were equated to the good miners of Trepça. When you finished the academic year, at the end of the year, maybe you're interested to know this, you had some bad pupils, you could not impose grade retention on them without the school-administered commission. The school principal was in charge of the teachers.

I remember a detail in third grade. I had a pupil, Jakup, I won't forget his name, he wouldn't study, he was a bad pupil, maybe the work was missing at home as well. They had some problems with the stepmother, his father had two wives so... and the inspector used to come to inspect the class and he goes, "Why is this one a bad pupil but the others are good?" And the commission says, "You should make him repeat the grade." I reacted, "I won't let my pupil repeat the grade because he's an orphan." I held additional classes with him for days, for months, today he is a lawyer. I took this one example, because there are a lot like this.

**Anita Susuri:** You told me about these cultural events, I know there was a *korzo*<sup>14</sup> where young people used to walk, did you go out too?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Every single evening. It was some kind of parade. We got all dressed up, the girls, the women, the men, and we used to walk around. From what is now the Grand Hotel to the Kosovo Parliament. We walked around, we ran into people, young people used to check each other out. But those of us who were married, we used to go to the Korzo pastry shop. The Korzo pastry shop was in front of, where do I say, when you go...

**Anita Susuri:** At Kino Armata.

**Bahtije Abrashi:** No, no, further. At the end of the main street, now it's, what bar is there?

**Anita Susuri:** It's Korner.

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Well it was there. That was the pastry shop where we used to gather a lot and its name was Korzo.

**Anita Susuri:** How did you meet Mister Aziz?

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<sup>14</sup> Main street, reserved for pedestrians.

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Mister Aziz? *Oooh* {onomatopoeic} you took me way back. I was a student in the third grade of *Shkolla Normale*, he used to teach at the economics school. And I liked him. Anyway, we go back and forth, and he says, “Tell your parents at home that I like you.” Who dared to tell, you were a student supposed to go to school to learn (laughs). There was a strict discipline in my family, “At 8:00 o’clock all six [children] of you have to be home.” If you didn’t come back by 8:00, there were consequences. You either couldn’t eat dinner, or if you wanted them to buy you something, they wouldn’t, you got punished. And I go, “No, no, I will go home at 8:00.” So he came along with a friend and with me and rang the bell. I was stuck, I hesitated, and they came inside and he told my father, “I like your daughter.” So on and so forth.

**Anita Susuri:** What was the reaction like after?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** The reaction at home was very harsh, “You need to get an education, I talked to him, that is not okay, you have to get an education.” We, but he talked to him and said, “I will never prevent her from pursuing an education, wherever she wants.” Because I wanted to go to Belgrade and study law, after I submitted my application, I drew them back and I stayed in Kosovo and got married.

**Anita Susuri:** Was it your decision or did the circumstances push you?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** No, no. The circumstances pushed me.

**Anita Susuri:** How did it go on after in ‘74 and later? It was better with the constitutions...

**Bahtije Abrashi:** After the constitution of Kosovo was approved, in ‘74, Kosovo was born a second time, or a third, or a sixth, or a tenth or what. We were always oppressed, they didn’t give rights to anybody. If you take the books, movies, documentaries, we would say, “How did we exist?” There was so much displacement, so much destruction, so much persecution, so much killings... and then it started... because the Yugoslav Presidency proposed the constitution, they had drafted it. And the Executive Council of Kosovo ratified it.

With the ratification of the constitution, things changed 360 degrees.<sup>15</sup> The faculty opened, the university opened, people started to get educated a lot. In ten years, I had the notes, for a short time there were so many professors, so many engineers, so many doctors, people from all types of professional profiles who graduated. Because our people were eager for knowledge. There was a Serbian plan against Albanians: “Displace, eliminate, don’t educate the Albanians.” But, this kind of attitude was discouraged.

**Anita Susuri:** In ‘79 you were chosen as Chair of the Women’s Conference in Pristina and I think you stopped your work in education.

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<sup>15</sup> The speaker mistakenly said 360 degrees, but meant 180 degrees.

**Bahtije Abrashi:** As a Youth<sup>16</sup> activist, I continued that activity in Pristina as well. I was quite active. With the move from Mitrovica to Pristina, I thought that life would die down. But, I was like that by nature. In the school where I worked, I also achieved some successes, so much so that it was a very large team, perhaps I was the youngest President of the Work Organization. And then, I was a delegate in the Assembly of Pristina, I held activities there too, in local communities especially. Especially about the education of children and the emancipation of women. Back then, in order to get appointed for a job, there was a Personnel Commission at the municipal level, they evaluated the work and decided who should go where.

They had decided to choose me as Chair of the Women's Conference, that's what it was called. Chair of Pristina Women's Conference, as a capital city. They even went to Aca Marović<sup>17</sup> Elementary School to evaluate what kind of children, what kind of pupils are there. That you should be an example for your *rreth*,<sup>18</sup> in order for the *rreth* to accept you and for your work to have an influence. I want to tell you this, the Personnel Commission had a very important role. I worked, there was the reporting sheet, it was the curriculum, what activities will take place this week, this month, half year, end of the year, you had to report on what you have worked on. So, I was quite active. Maybe there I was doing things that I had already worked on.

And then when my mandate was over they appointed me Chair of the Conference, Chair of Kosovo Women. That was an even greater commitment. You represented a nation, a people, a gender, you had to be very hard-working, very productive so you prosper also with... because through me, I represented women of Kosovo, of course especially Albanian women. When you went to the other republics or when we gathered, they used to look at you with a very critical eye, how you look, how you express yourself, how you behave, maybe even how you eat your food, how you hold the fork or the knife. Because they were, they had prejudice, especially towards Kosovo people, in particular women.

So, it was a very big commitment. During that time my husband was very active as an economist as well. Maybe he was one of the very few economists of Kosovo, one or two. The Personnel Commission appointed him as well, as the Secretary of Economy<sup>19</sup> at the Executive Council of Kosovo. During his time, there was a generation of members [of the state], as it is known today, as the government. The most eminent people of Kosovo who were educated, especially outside of Kosovo. There was no faculty, no university, so to graduate from university in another republic or another country you had to work very hard, and to suck up knowledge like those sponges that absorb water. He has served two terms as Secretary of Economy. He worked hard.

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<sup>16</sup> After the Second World War, SKOJ - *Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije* (The League Communist Youth of Yugoslavia) became a part of a wider organization of Yugoslav youth, the People's Youth of Yugoslavia, which later became the League of Socialist Youth of Yugoslavia.

<sup>17</sup> Present day, Faik Konica Elementary School in downtown Pristina.

<sup>18</sup> *Rreth* (circle) is the social circle, it includes not only the family but also the people with whom an individual is in contact. The opinion of the *rreth* is crucial in defining one's reputation.

<sup>19</sup> Leadership position in the Autonomous Province of Kosovo equivalent to the Minister of Economy.

After the war I told one person... “They were communists,” “Listen here, boy, whatever you touch in Pristina and Kosovo, the door handle is the merit of that generation.” Starting from the construction of Radio Prishtina, I take only Mitrovica [Prishtina], the building of the Economic Chamber, Youth Palace, Rilindja Media Palace, you know where that is?

**Anita Susuri:** Yes, yes.

**Bahtije Abrashi:** And then Radio Prishtina, Youth Palace, Radio Prishtina, the infrastructure, the hospital, the university, the libraries. Everything is the merit of that generation headed by my husband Aziz Abrashi. There was a need in the second term again, this Personnel Commission chose him as a Secretary of Economy for a second time. So his merits are on a state level. Some [industrial] giants that were built on every municipality, on the same level of Trepça, in Peja, there was the battery factory, in Gjakova the textile factory, the factory of, at the moment, I can't recall. At the moment, I can't recall. In Prizren, there was Filigrani, in Gjilan the battery factory, they were all built at that time. That's where all the Kosovo people were employed.

But, it was a very big revolution. In Ferizaj there was the furniture factory, it had above 2,000 employees. It kind of went bankrupt and it had to be closed down. He [my husband] as Secretary of Economy, as a minister, said, “I will go there, I won't allow the factory to close down,” and he willingly went there. He worked for twelve hours...

**Anita Susuri:** As a director, right?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** As a director. He was very hardworking. When I go to Ferizaj I say, “I am his wife,” or it's our children, I say it with pride because all of them know it. So, the factory didn't go bankrupt. It started producing a lot. The products were sold in America, in Italy, in Switzerland. It [the factory] built its network. They worked in two-three shifts in order to produce as much furniture as possible.

**Anita Susuri:** You also have a role in building the [Boro Ramizi] Youth Palace, in convincing the citizens. What was that like?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** The Youth Palace was modeled after, it was built in Sarajevo [first] and some of us took an initiative, me as the Chair of Pristina Women's Conference, and many other people that were in Pristina at the time. There was also the mayor Nazmi Mustafa, one of the first engineers, and I was in the eldership of that forum. In order to build the Youth Palace, my role and the other's was... because we didn't have money to build that palace, we had to do it through self-financing. So we went to local communities with the work organizations to governmental bodies, and told them that the citizens need to contribute financially themselves in order to build it. So that was approved in the Municipal Assembly of Pristina while I was Chair of Pristina Women's Conference. And so the Palace of Youth was built.

That is a palace of Pristina built through self-financing. No one can alter it, sell it, nor buy it because it's a property of the citizens of Mitrovica [Pristina]. It was a misunderstanding at the municipal level.

**Anita Susuri:** In '84 you said that you were appointed Chair of Women which was the Conference of Kosovo's women and you exercised that role until '89 I think.

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Four years.

**Anita Susuri:** But in the meantime your husband also worked in Trepça. How did it happen? He constantly traveled, I am guessing he did. What was that like for you? So, how did you see, as a spouse, the role he had? It was a very big responsibility because Trepça was the third in the Balkans. How did you see this? How did this reflect?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** We as Mitrovica natives felt the need to contribute even more to Mitrovica. I said, the Personnel Commission of the then Autonomous Province of Kosovo appointed him to go. And I was the Chair of Kosovo's Women a little bit before him. They called me, "Come, you have to go and become the Chair," of course I had to decide in accordance with my spouse. After three or four days I told him, "I need to give them an answer. He said, "I am telling you once again, I know the kind of wife I have. Go, society is calling for you, the country needs you. Go on and go."

We got along really well. Maybe I took on some family responsibilities as a burden, so I wouldn't hinder him. So when he came home he had the time to rest, to think about the future of the workers of Trepça. He was also very hard-working in the Tefik Çanga factory as he was in Trepça. So much so that he managed to increase the wages to 1,200-3,000 [Deutsch] marks<sup>20</sup> per miner. He was very committed to the workers, to Trepça, to Kosovo.

**Anita Susuri:** Yes, most of the miners we have interviewed in some way describe the period in which Mr. Aziz was the director of Trepça, as the golden age of Trepça.

**Bahtije Abrashi:** That's what I'm saying, he achieved a lot.

**Anita Susuri:** Your husband has contributed a lot but how did this reflect? Did he have any other engagements or time?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** He, [Burhan \[Kavaja\]](#) was his neighbor, he was his right arm and he was also a director in Elez Han. And then he invited him, when he went as a director in Trepça. He had an appreciation for his work because he's an engineer, so he took him along and sent him as a director in Stantërg. They were close collaborators. So, they achieved great success together. Now I'll mention a detail. He didn't have it easy. They were always targets of Serbia because they couldn't exploit Trepça like they used to anymore.

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<sup>20</sup> *Marka, Deutsche Mark*, the basic monetary unit of West Germany from 1948 to 1990 and of reunited Germany from 1990 to 2001. It was used as a stable, non-official currency in various Yugoslavian republics as a result of hyper-inflation of the Yugoslavian *dinar*.

Example, Trepça has also produced batteries in Mitrovica, there was the battery factory in Gjilan as well. The [Yugoslav] military up until then was supplied with batteries on a Yugoslav level without paying a single *dinar*.<sup>21</sup> And so my husband stopped this. Only with the international stock exchange [they regulated their economic relations]. We have to sell it to someone, we first sell it to you and that was true. And so many other things, gold, silver. So, they started putting an end to such exploitative practices, because that was not okay.

At that time, a very difficult policy had entered. The irregularities had started in Kosovo, after the constitution, after ten years of successes achieved after the constitution was ratified, after the death of Tito,<sup>22</sup> the Serbian leadership took the initiative to change the Constitution of Kosovo. Making those changes was a big deal and so the Kosovo leadership held a meeting in Gërmia, in a villa which belonged to the Executive Council of Kosovo where the delegations of other republics, other countries came to meet. There was a place where they were hosted and where all the talks were held. The meeting of Kosovo's leadership was held.

I also participated due to my role as Chair of Women. That was a difficult meeting. Pera Kostić came in the delegation along with many others and they presented the arguments on why they want to change the Constitution of Kosovo. They presented it like a little correction, this and that. But the reason they wanted to change the Constitution of Kosovo was because in the Constitution of Kosovo, at the time... there was the Autonomous Province of Kosovo, a constitutive part of Yugoslavia. We had crossed the Republic of Serbia, so we were equal to the other republics. This bothered them because they weren't able to do their twisted activities that they did here.

It was very difficult during that meeting. We reacted, I'm sure a stenogram exists, the documentation, because at that time everything was well-documented. I reacted very harshly and I asked, "If Tito was alive," our comrade Tito back then, "if Edvard Kardelj was alive," who was the brain of Yugoslavia, he contributed a lot to drafting the Constitution of Kosovo, "would you take the initiative that you have taken now? I don't agree with this." There was a mess, who am I, what am I, what I think, why am I saying this. "The Constitution was approved by the Executive Council of Kosovo, if the Council has any remarks, they should give them, not you." But, they found support and they made the changes that cost us dearly.

### Part Three

**Anita Susuri:** In '89, at first in '88 the march started in November...

**Bahtije Abrashi:** The miners'.

**Anita Susuri:** Trepça's miners. Do you remember that day?

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<sup>21</sup> *Dinar* was the currency in Yugoslavia

<sup>22</sup> Jospe Broz Tito, former President of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.



**Bahtije Abrashi:** How could I not. Leading that march was my late husband, there was Burhan, there was [Ibush \[Jonuzi\]](#), there was [Avdi \[Uka\]](#). Oh there were many many others, I can't remember the names. They took the photograph of Tito, the Yugoslav flag and they showed revolt, a discontent which was manifested in Kosovo [upon revoking] '74 Constitution. I'm repeating the words, "Don't educate, don't employ the Albanians. Destroy and eliminate them." This is what Serb Republic claimed and this was Milošević's<sup>23</sup> plan. Resting on this claim, they [Serbs] justified all their bad deeds. This claim was legitimized by the Academy of Serbia, by very eminent people, as Čubrilović<sup>24</sup> was at that time.

**Anita Susuri:** We were talking about when the march started, you told us that there was Tito's photograph and the [Yugoslav] flag. I'm interested to know what was it that you experienced when you saw that this is happening?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** I might get emotional here because it wasn't easy. They walked to the city and they were stationed at the Youth Palace. They looked for her there, because [Kaqusha Jashari](#) was the head of the Party. She has come up on stage saying that it will not change, it can't, the whole situation, there won't be any changes to the Constitution. But they did not stop with that, they continued the strike. Allow me to emphasize this, the strike was not social, it was political, because it has a different connotation when it's social, and different when it's political.

Some have passed away, some are still alive, some are in between. They stayed in the mine pit for seven days and seven nights. Both the leadership and the general director Aziz Abrashi sat with them. He never separated from the miners. He didn't come home at all for three days and three nights. The third night he came home to change. When I saw him he had pale, gray hair. That's when I realized how hard he had it. His clothes, they had holes in them, you'd think something has bitten them or someone has thrown on them the very heavy substances that were in the mine. Because the other miners had their work outfits that were more resistant, but he did not.

I was also in the leadership of the Socialist League, chairwoman, and I tell them what the situation is like there. And after three days they were labeled as irredentists. Irredentist is a very charged term. I tried to tell them that they were not irredentists, but no use. The fifth day when he came home, I felt very anxious because I felt sorry for him because he was my husband, the father of my children, as a director of a big [industrial] giant, as an economist, as a hard worker of unmatched qualities. And I tell him, "You are the general director, you don't have to stay there with the miners."

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<sup>23</sup> Slobodan Milošević (1941-2006), Yugoslav leader whose ascension to power began in 1987, when at the Communist League of Yugoslavia's Plenum he embraced the cause of Kosovo Serbian nationalists and immediately afterwards became President of Serbia and revoked Kosovo's autonomy.

<sup>24</sup> Vaso Čubrilović (1897-1990) was a Bosnian Serb political activist and academic, a member of the conspiratorial group Young Bosnia, which executed the assassination of the Hapsburg Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914. He advocated the ethnic cleansing of minorities from Serbia, notably the Albanians of Kosovo, in a memorandum published in 1937 entitled *Isejavanje Arnauta* (The Expulsion of the Albanians).

People from the Federal and Central Committee joined the talks to convince the miners to come out. Stipe Šuvar<sup>25</sup> was the chairman. He was very hard on him. Because he didn't want them to be labeled as irredentists because their demands were just. There were twelve or nine demands that were not against anyone, but they demanded their rights and the rights of all Albanians in Kosovo. You can't humiliate us this much. But he didn't want to hear it... those are convictions, they had formed their convictions, they needed to carry out their plan.

And I was a little selfish, I told him, "You have to give up because there will be grave consequences at home." He said, "Did you work in education?" I said, "Yes," "Would you leave your pupils at the mercy of someone else?" I said, "No." I started to cry. He said, "I can't leave my workers, my miners either." He was very connected to them. I'll move to something else. Every time, at least once a month, he went to the miner's canteen to examine the food. He went to the hall unannounced, and they served him food. He went up to a miner and saw the food and said, "This is mine, not yours." Maybe someone didn't recognize him and said, "Who are you?" The other guy went, "Hey, it's the general director." He was very close with them. I'm taking this as an example because he was very connected to them.

And the night the miners came out [of the pit], Milošević held a really big national rally in Belgrade, and there they were threatened with prison. They had already prepared the grounds to imprison them, they were just waiting for them to come out. And they came some time before the morning, he [late husband] was sick, he had a fever, he had a throat ache because he stayed in very difficult conditions. The police came, three cops at the door, they were big, armed. Of course, in Serbian, "Good evening!" "Good evening," I tell them, "Yes?" "Is the general director here?" I said, "Yes, what do you need him for?" "We have the order to invite him for an interrogation." I had already figured out what was going on. I said, "I'm sorry, he is sick, he will come down to the station on his own when he feels better." They consulted with someone through their walkie talkies. They said, "No, bring him."

I went into the room and woke him up, it was not easy, and I gave him. He had a pair of wool underwear, a wool turtleneck, it was like arming him. He went to... they took him. I was expecting for them to return him, because they said they would. They tricked us. I kept on waiting, and waiting. Burhan's wife calls me at the same time, and she says... but they could find Burhan there too, because he came, I told him, "Come to dinner," because his wife wasn't home. He said, "I will go home and rest." They took both Burhan and Aziz at the same time.

In the morning... they [children] were expecting their dad, and they said, "Our father deserves praise. What kind of country comes and puts him in prison?" They experienced a shock and fell asleep. I was stuck at home, my brother-in-law was there. In the morning the chauffeur arrived to take him [husband] to his office. Dragan. He waited downstairs, he [husband] was never ever late so the chauffeur was shocked. When he came upstairs he said, "Is the director sick?" I said, "No, come inside." He came in. I said, "The director has been taken, this and that." Can you imagine the way he cried? Like

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<sup>25</sup> Stipe Šuvar (1936 – 2004) was a Croatian politician and sociologist who was regarded to have been one of the most influential communist politicians in the League of Communists of Croatia in Socialist Republic of Croatia during Yugoslavia and later in modern Croatia.

a child. He said, "If they took him to prison... is there anyone more honest and hard-working in Kosovo?" I said, "They took him." He was in prison for 14 months.

After five days... it wasn't easy for the family, for his mom, for his brothers, for his sisters, for his children, for all of Kosovo. How could they take Aziz to prison? But they were more powerful, this was by design. And he had gone on strike. He didn't eat for four-five days, he didn't want to live anymore. He was in solitary confinement. He had feared that they could have taken Linda to prison, because she worked in television, and she hosted youth shows. She had a quite political show which was broadcasted in all televisions of the republics, Croatia, Bosnia, Slovenia. And he feared they took her to prison as well. He feared for me too.

And the head of the court called me, Asllan Baruti, he called me on the phone because we were from the same town. He told me, "Please come by because I have to talk to you and don't tell anyone that I have called you." I started up my car, I arrived in Mitrovica in 20 minutes and I went straight to the head of the court. But he was his friend too, he had to take him in. He explained it to me, "He went on strike, he's not doing well. They usually call their fathers, mothers in these cases. But we saw it fit to call you to talk to him." "Alright".

Mitrovica's prison has seven floors, I climbed to the seventh floor by foot, there was no elevator. And I went into an office where there was a desk, and a smaller table with three, a small table with three chairs. The prison director... as soon as I went in I sat on the desk because I got tired, it was closest to me. He said, "No, don't sit there." I said, "Why?" I said, "I'm comfortable here. I'm tired, I can't get up anymore." "Please move to this chair, move to this chair, move to the [smaller] table."

He thought he was dealing with an illiterate woman. I've seen movies, I've read books about how they listen in [spy]. He went to take the late Aziz. As soon as I looked under the chair, I saw a small microphone. Plus the wall was punctured, there was a wire on the other wall. The prison director came and I had an argument with him. I said, "I don't want to sit on this chair," he said, "But, why? The chair is nice." I said, "You sit here and let them listen in on what you're saying, not me because I have nothing to say. I am not against my state, neither is he," and I got up to leave. "Please, please," he almost cried.

He [husband] came and I immediately went {explains with hands}, "It's being recorded." He had a letter and he said, "I guessed so." There we had a constructive conversation about him stopping the strike. For the sake of the miners, the sake of the people, for the sake of the children and mine as his spouse. Why die in debt [without explaining]? You have to go to court and tell the truth, "Don't take the miners down with you." When I told him, "Don't take the miners down with you," it seems like he changed his mind at that moment. He said, "Yes, I want to eat."

He writes on the letter secretly from the prison director, "I feared for you, for Linda." "We are very well," and then I write to him, "We are very well. Don't fear for us." And now the director, maybe this is interesting as well. I tell him, "Sherafedin," they called him Shero because we were of the same town,

“go and buy him two *burek*<sup>26</sup> and two yogurts, let him eat.” He said, “You’re ordering me?” I said, “Well I don’t have anyone else, only you.” He went out. Anyway, he told someone else and they brought it. He started to eat. So, this was very difficult as well. He had lost a lot of weight, had sunken eyes...

**Anita Susuri:** Was that the first time you saw him since he went to prison?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Yes, the first time. It was difficult.

**Anita Susuri:** How did he seem?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** He lost a lot of weight, he was unshaven, he was like that in the mine too but he was stoic. But we had a lot of respect and trust for each other, so he listened. And then we regularly visited once a week. I used to take Linda with me, and then it was my son’s turn. But maybe I was mistaken, I didn’t talk to him, I didn’t tell him, he didn’t know what prison was like, he only saw it in movies. And when he saw his father behind bars he yelled, “My dad didn’t deserve this,” and he fainted. He saw our son, he saw me. There was an attending physician. He then came back. But he [son] couldn’t recover for days. On the same day we went to my late mother in Mitrovica. From all the stress, he broke his leg. He went out to the yard to play with my brother’s children, and he broke his leg.

There are always consequences, always. All intellectuals in Kosovo, especially in the city, had a dose of fear [due to political persecutions]. They will be taken now, they will be taken now. At the time they arrested 260 intellectuals of the university, economics, media, and they took them to the prison in Niš. Among others, out of the women, I was also on the list and the late Drita Dobrosi. Whoever saved us, I could die and never know.

The Chair of Bosnia’s Women Conference herself called me on the phone and she told me, “Call me from some neighbor’s phone.” Because our phone was wired. About the phone being wired, a student of mine, he was an engineer at the post office, came and told me, “Teacher, your phone was wired.” And I went to call Elmaze from a neighbor’s phone, “Do you know that you and Drita Dobrosi are on the list to be arrested?” I said, “I don’t care anymore, let them arrest me.” And I really didn’t care.

But I don’t know how we got away with it, maybe the Chair [Women’s Conferences] of the other republics intervened because I had really good relations with the ones from Slovenia, Bosnia and Croatia. Now I’ll move to another topic, can I? The Chair of Croatia’s Women Conference, a university professor of sociology, whom I hosted in Pristina and when I escorted her out, she told me, “Kosovo can only be saved by natality and education.” Even now I will give out this message, this still applies to Kosovo, knowledge, university and natality will save us. Natality has decreased a lot, but we’re still doing better than the other republics.

**Anita Susuri:** At the time when the trial was happening, you had the request for the trial to be public...

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<sup>26</sup> *Burek* is a family of baked filled pastries made of a thin flaky dough such as phyllo or yufka, of Anatolian origins and also found in the cuisines of the Balkans.

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Yes. There were talks, but what was talked was also done. That the trial of these 14, all 14 of those who belonged to the mine will be behind closed doors. They wanted to build a tunnel from the prison to the court, they are close in Mitrovica, so no one sees them. Because they were considered irredentists according to Article 114 and they'd get death penalty. Back then as a spouse I called the President of Yugoslavia [presidency], Drnovšek,<sup>27</sup> I still had the contacts, "Arrange a meeting for us, I need to see you." His assistant called me on the phone the next day and told me, "The President said that you can come the day after tomorrow at this time." I brought Linda and my son along, I didn't have strength to drive to... because I am, I've been a driver for 36 years. And so I went to Belgrade.

I had prepared a four-five page report because how could I explain everything, the man doesn't have the time to listen. He looked at me, he asked Linda, "How old are you, what did you study, what do you do?" She told him her story, she told him she was a journalist. He said, "I'll take you to Slovenia as a journalist." And he promised me, "I don't have more power, only to make the trial open to the public." And that's how it happened. The trial lasted very long. It was very difficult. You'd go and see the man in handcuffs, exhausted. You could imagine anything, but not that someone who was devoted to Yugoslavia and the state could go to prison. He didn't work to come to power, but he worked for the state at the time. That's how we were prepared because Kosovo needed people for statebuilding, not to be in power. But others made decisions for us.

**Anita Susuri:** What was your opinion at the time? What did you think would happen? What decision would they make?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** After I visited Drnovšek, I changed my mind. Because he made some big promises and the trial was open. Come to think of it, the judge was Ismet Emra, [Aziz's] his friend, and his roommate as students in Belgrade. It wasn't easy for him either. The citizens threatened him with "Don't you dare sentence them." In all honesty, I sent him a threat too, "Careful what you do!" His wife threatened him, his children threatened him. So, the poor guy was put in a bad spot.

So at the moment it was announced that they were freed, the whole city got up on their feet. All of Kosovo was on their feet, what is going on...? I went to the courtroom with my son. Linda was more brusque, more dynamic, more explosive. And so I thought to myself there's no way I'll take her with me, in case they sentence him [husband], something might happen to her. My brothers were at my house, as well as a friend of his from Gjakova, Nesim Batina, he came to follow the trial. And I said, "Let's leave Linda behind, so she doesn't come to the trial." "What do we do?" "Let's draw lots." So we did and luck had it so Gazmend came with me.

Gazmend had a, because he was very neat he always had a tie, he loved wearing a tie, he had lots of ties. He had a tie in his pocket. And the trial started, Gazmend was holding my hand tight, so tight that

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<sup>27</sup> Janez Drnovšek was a Slovenian liberal politician, President of the Presidency of Yugoslavia (1989-1990), Prime Minister of Slovenia (1992-2002), and President of Slovenia (2002-2007).

I lost my focus, I felt bad telling him to let go of my hand. But that was his way of expressing his revolt, his anxiety. And it [verdict] came, they were freed. The citizens were all on their feet, they weren't allowed to be anywhere near the courtroom.

Linda was somewhere in the city center with friends and family. Linda was, they did not let her get close [to the courtroom], she was in the city center. She put on the radio, she listened to Musë Preniqi, he was a journalist at the Radio Prishtina. I saw him run through chairs and tables of the courtroom to get out and broadcast the news as soon as possible. She ran so fast to the courtroom that the security was surprised when they saw her in the halls of the courtroom. I only heard her voice, they told her, "Where are you going? Where are you going? How did you get here?" She said, "I flew and arrived here."

Then, someone was probably there, and they calmed her down, they said to her, "He's free!" She wanted to see her father, but then they were drawn back again, they were taken to the prison. So Gazmend wanted to put a tie on him. Of course they didn't let him. It was over, the procedure was done. I had the photograph painted, a journalist must've taken that photograph. All the citizens were out, people were on their balconies, but we were surrounded by the police. So we decided to use the transit road that passes by the Dedin Krš to come to Pristina.

Gazmend was driving. When we arrived at the cemetery, I don't know, something had taken over me, and I told him, "Don't drive up straight, go back to the city." "Yes, Mom, they'll make us go back." "Let them turn us back." And we went straight to the front door of my late husband's family home. He met his mother and his extended family, his mother fainted. In five minutes, people gathered and it was as if a large gathering was taking place in front of the house. There were so many people gathered. Linda continued with her uncle to Pristina to wait for people there. We lived next to the elementary school in Sunny Hill, next to the Qerimi Bakery. There is a large plateau.

When we arrived there were hundreds of people. The entrance of the residential building had a red carpet that the residents and our friends placed. On top of it all, it was a time when lilacs bloomed, so there were a lot of lilacs. So she called me back to Mitrovica and said to me, "Mom, please come back sooner in case something happens because a lot of people have gathered here" and I said to her... my late mother-in-law said to me, "Don't take him so soon," "No, I'm taking him this time to celebrate and you'll join us afterwards." They came. They took him out like this {describes with hands} until he went inside.

He went out on the balcony and saluted everyone. There were children, school children. I had two-three chocolate boxes, and I sent a child, a grandchild, to buy all the candy there was in the store. "Bring them up." And I told him, "Give them away." From the balcony he showered them all with candy. They somehow calmed down, and there was police presence everywhere. So, it was difficult. Perhaps I am describing this with ease, but this was not easy, not easy.

I will mention this detail too. We went... in the evening my late mother said to her daughters-in-law, “Take two or three kilograms of meat and roll up some *sarma*.<sup>28</sup> If they free him, we have to rejoice, we have to eat. Even if they don’t free him, we have to eat.” There was a strong uncertainty. That friend from Gjakova came, he saw the women preparing *sarma*. I remember he went upstairs and yelled, “Joy, joy, joy. They will free him. We are getting ready.” And stuff like that. Maybe for the viewers it’s boring, but for me it was quite an experience.

## Part Four

**Anita Susuri:** After Mr. Aziz got out of prison, you told us that you had offers to leave Kosovo and go somewhere abroad.

**Bahtije Abrashi:** After he got out of prison, thousands of people came to visit him. On May 2 [1990], I remember that year, thousands of people came to my house, people who came to visit him. But, he had a lot of offers from the guests, from admirers, from the people that loved him, the people who recognized him as an important person. Offers to go to Germany, offers to go to Switzerland, a few offers at that moment. We were in a dilemma, do we leave or not? Because we would suffer grave consequences. He was unemployed, I was unemployed. Linda used to work in television, she lost her job too. Even our extended family, to let us know the repression they could commit, they also fired my three brothers, and two of their wives. So... we had a dilemma at home, do we leave, do we stay, what do we do. I didn’t sleep all night.

In the morning all four of us were talking, I said, “We won’t die of hunger. I know how to sew, I have the [sewing] machine, I can start sewing,” I’m a teacher, you need to have a diploma in order to... “I will open a preschool, I have a big living room, I could turn it into a preschool for five or six children, and there you go. After all, I’ll become a taxi driver and I could earn money there too. A woman taxi driver.” I had a [Volkswagen] Golf. So, I encouraged my family not to leave [Kosovo], but to stay. I think it was the right thing to do, but maybe sometimes I also had a say in our family, that my husband and children appreciated it, and so we remained in Kosovo. We continued to work. Thank God we worked, none of us in our professions but we didn’t struggle.

**Anita Susuri:** Before moving on to the ‘90s, I wanted to go back a bit because you told me earlier about a confrontation you had with Milošević in ‘87...

**Bahtije Abrashi:** After all these reprisals, I was the Chair of Kosovo Women’s Conference and they told me, they invited me, the women had scheduled a visit to Fushë Kosova. When I went there, there were two or three women who were leading members of the Women’s Conference, leading members of Kosovo’s Socialist League. There were some from the Committee too. I went to the meeting, and when I went inside the hall in Fushë Kosova, there were probably 300 people there. Milošević was there too,

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<sup>28</sup> *Sarma*, commonly marketed as stuffed grape leaves or stuffed cabbage leaves, is a stuffed dish in Southeastern European and Middle Eastern cuisine that comprises fermented leaves—such as cabbage, patencia dock, collard, grapevine, kale or chard leaves—rolled around a filling of grains, minced meat, or both.

and they were all Milošević's.<sup>29</sup> And there they unveiled their program that had even more problematic things planned for Albanians. Deportation, firing us from our jobs, closing down schools, closing down the university, [taking away power of the] executive bodies, the press. It was horrible, horrible.

Among other things, they said that us Kosovo women don't know anything else but to give birth, "You've become like birth-giving machines, only giving birth to babies. Fushë Kosova is a cradle of Serbia." And many other horrible things. And I took the floor. A Montenegrin, Hujsić was a presidency member. When I took the floor, he said, "They shouldn't feel even more threatened by you," I said, "Let them feel threatened, I feel threatened too." Oh God, we'll do this to you, we'll do that to you. So when they said Fushë Kosova is a cradle of Serbia "*Kosovo Polje je srpska koljevka*" I'm interpreting it in Serbian. I said, "In Fushë Kosova, Fushë Kosova is one of those cradles that is cradled in Fushë Kosova. And that is the cradle of Albanians, Serbs, Montenegrins, Romani and others."

At that point the hall fired up even more. "You know nothing, only to give birth," and then they said, "We know other ways too. We will rape you all." They've had it in their plans. "First we will rape," because they said, "Fadil Hoxha<sup>30</sup> insulted Serbs." And I said, "Why are you attributing it to Fadil Hoxha, he said 'I apologize for what I haven't said.'" And the hall fired up at that moment. "We will rape Fadil Hoxha's wife." This is all documented...

**Anita Susuri:** There were statements like this in the meeting?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** In the meeting, with more than 300 people present. They shamelessly declared {describing with hands}, the agenda was not even respected or anything. "His wife, his daughter, his daughter-in-law," with names, "all Albanians, you too." They shamelessly addressed me {describes with hands}. So I stooped down on their level and I said to them, "Go on, come near me. I have it at the tip of my tongue. Aren't you ashamed that your children and the younger generations might hear you speak like this? We cultivated a Brotherhood and Unity but you express yourselves like this." I don't even know what I said, I can't reproduce myself, but they're all recorded, television channels and the police had it recorded. And they almost beat me up. Kllokoqi, the cameraman of the Radio Television of Pristina, was behind me. He came close to me and said to me, "Comrade Bahtije, I have your back, don't worry. Though I don't know about the front." So, this is the mood that reigned.

My driver came close to me, he was worried they would assault me. I didn't give up at all. They were vulgar, so I was even more vulgar because at that moment I had to respond in the same way as them. There was a corridor formed so I could leave the meeting. I say that they were all Milošević's. There were women, leading members of the Kosovo Women's Conference, they should have stood up and opposed it. There were also leading members of the Socialist League, none of them... Serbs stood for

<sup>29</sup> In this context, the speaker uses the plural of Milošević's name to describe the people as sharing the same ideology with him.

<sup>30</sup> Fadil Hoxha (1916-2001), Albanian Communist partisan leader from Gjakova, who held a number of high posts in Kosovo and Yugoslavia, including the rotating post of Vice President of the Federal Presidency, the highest leadership post in Yugoslavia under Tito, in 1978-79. He retired in 1986, but was expelled from the League of Communist on charges of nationalism.



one another, though they held public office in Kosovo institutions. None of them stood up to oppose them or disagree with that. That's why I have the right to say they were all Milošević's. That's where Milošević's program was unveiled. Only I know how I managed to get home.

The next day they called from Turkey, they called from Germany, from Switzerland because they watched the news and saw the state I was in. Yes, was I home or in prison? But I don't know how I got away with it, but I did get away with it. The other issue, I was in Belgrade in the leadership of the Women's Conference. There was an agenda, they adhered to it. The Chair of Serbia and Macedonia Women's Conference, categorically insisted on adding Fadil Hoxha's statement to the agenda.

The Chair of Yugoslavia Women's Conference was Slovenian, Sofia, she said, "I don't have it on my agenda and I don't need to add it." The ones in Kosovo should... they added it to the agenda and the Chair of Serbia Women's Conference said, "We will add it," among other things she said, "He's just like Artuković." Artuković, is, or he was because he's dead now, was an *ustaša*<sup>31</sup> of Croatia who was sentenced to death. And I stood up and said, "I won't allow a leadership of Yugoslav level to compare my legend, hero of the people Fadil Hoxha to Artuković." And I demonstratively left the meeting.

But, I don't know how I escaped the press. It's true that the Chair of Yugoslavia [Women's Conference] was close to me and told me, "Don't dare say anything else, only what you said in the meeting." From the Yugoslav Central Committee I barely escaped the press, they followed me until I left Belgrade for statements. But I escaped.

**Anita Susuri:** What was the [Fadil Hoxha] statement that bothered them?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** It was that that offended them, that Serbs enjoyed more freedom or something similar. But it isn't true because I went, I knew people in the leadership of the League of Warriors, but I took a statement from the Head of the League of Warriors and he said it isn't true. I also took three other statements from Serbs, officers, they said it isn't true. That's why I said, "Fadil Hoxha said, 'I apologize for what I haven't said.'" This was my response in Belgrade as well as in Fushë Kosova.

Then, the next day when I went to my office, I won't mention his name, he was my professor and director, and he said to me in the office, "My dear girl, do you know you're a mother, you have a husband, you have brothers and everything?" I said, "Well, I was born only once and I will die only once." When members of the leadership arrived, two or three Serbs, "How were you that harsh?" And everything. I said, "I thought that you would support me and oppose them, but you all think the same."

Then, after they imprisoned my late husband, I worked as a member of the leadership for three more months. I saw what was going on, what was happening, but I resigned after three months because I didn't agree with that kind of politics and I said to myself, if they fire me instead I will face even bigger

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<sup>31</sup> *Ustaša*, also spelled *Ustasha*, plural *Ustaše*, Croatian fascist movement that nominally ruled the Independent State of Croatia during the Second World War.

consequences. I resigned from leadership positions in the Local Community to the highest federal bodies, “I don’t want to deal with politics anymore.”

**Anita Susuri:** What was life like for you after? You told us about the difficult period of time when Mr. Aziz was in prison, you made the decision to remain here. How did life continue after in the ‘90s?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** We had to organize ourselves. Lucky for us, there was the solidarity of our family and friends among ourselves. So, we didn’t let anyone struggle. Yes, that affected them too.

**Anita Susuri:** At the time, I think there was a... you mentioned solidarity, there was a movement among miners called A Family Helps a Family...

**Bahtije Abrashi:** A Family Helps a Family, and after that in the mining pit there was a proposal, one of the newest, the reconciliation of blood feuds. That’s their merit. And then they organized and they reconciled the blood feuds at Verra e Llukës with thousands of people, because they were confined [in their homes due to blood feuds].

**Anita Susuri:** Were you involved in any type of work after your resignation? You said you quit politics.

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Then I exercised my rights, I retired. We had really good pensions, but they [the Milosević regime] put an end to that too. But then, my son started working at a Slovenian company, it was hard. Because of the appreciation people had for my family, a lot of people helped, one of them the Chair of Slovenia Women’s Conference. The Chair of Croatia Women’s Conference, the one that said to me, “Preserve natality and the university.” She invited Linda to go to Zagreb, to work at the Radio Television of Zagreb. To gain life experience, so she remained there.

Then, after the war she was employed in the TV station again, because she was an editor-in-chief there. She worked, she contributed a lot. Again she didn’t agree with the policies of the station she was running, the abuses that occurred, and she said. “I don’t belong to that kind of station, to that kind of directory,” and she quit television. And then, she opened up a boutique, she sewed wedding dresses together with her friend Xheraldina. Then, as a family we opened up a cosmetics store, at the street on... the way to Llap, at Vellusha, and that’s where things started to go right. My son was working, Linda was working, my daughter-in-law was working. In the evening we prepared the goods, in the morning we took it there. And just like that, we did it in order to live. But, that store, that cosmetics store set the grounds for us not to struggle.

**Anita Susuri:** Mrs. Bahtije, I would like to talk to you about the war period. You were here till the bombings, or how was it?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** The war period was very difficult. You could tell that the war was about to start, the consequences were very grave. Someone stole Linda’s car and they threatened her husband, “If you tell someone we’ve stolen your car, we will murder your son,” her only son. All three of them went to Macedonia, Skopje. Me, my son, daughter-in-law, grandchild, and my late husband remained in

Pristina. The late Aziz, went outside, when he came back he said, “I found three tickets. We can’t go anywhere, not the other republics, not Turkey, not even Montenegro, nowhere, everything is closed. But I found the tickets, the last bus to Sarajevo.” I responded, I didn’t want to go, “No please, no please!”

My son was in London at the time with work. My daughter-in-law was waiting for us to decide. He was begging me and he said this, “Do you remember what they threatened you with in Fushë Kosova, that’s their plan. Please be prepared.” And so I went to Sarajevo, and he remained at home. So, four of us were on four different sides of the world. My son in England, my late husband in Pristina, my daughter in Macedonia, and I in Bosnia. I stayed in Sarajevo with my daughter-in-law and my one-month-old grandchild, because I had a place to go to in Turkey, but there was no plane.

So at Sarajevo, when they started to bomb Serbia and their targets in Kosovo, all of Sarajevo were up on their feet. We saw the airplane lights going one after the other from Italy’s Aviano [NATO base]. Then after about a week, I got on the first plane to Turkey along with my daughter-in-law. There, I was at an apartment, they treated us as refugees immediately. And when they used to say “*Mülteci*” [Turkish: refugee], it was a heavy term, oh God, because we were refugees.

A big number of Albanians were placed in tents, but I was... in the morning two men came at the door, “There’s this aid for you from the local municipality” and there was a lot. But at another house I had a neighbor from Mitrovica, 25 people were there in a two-room apartment. And I gave half of the aid to them, I kept a little something to myself. So, Aziz remained in Pristina. We were quite scared.

**Anita Susuri:** Did you contact him?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Yes, we called him on our neighbor’s phone that lived in the same building, they didn’t cut their phone, I knew he was in Pristina through them. But, at some point, he didn’t dare to stay at home by himself, he went to another apartment with Burhan and a friend of his. They captured them and beat them up and turned their backs black and blue, and they wanted to kill them. They consulted with someone and they told them, “No, we need them. Keep them alive.”

**Anita Susuri:** The police beat them up, right?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Yes, yes. The police. My son had helped an officer with medication to save his son’s life... and he was in the Serbian military and my son called him, “You told me that when things are rough, you would help me. You will go take my father from his apartment and bring him to Skopje,” he said, “Done.” My late husband didn’t trust him. He told him, “No, I won’t leave. I want to stay home,” and he told my son, he said, “He doesn’t want to leave, he wants to stay.”

Then, he calls him again. He said, “Dad, he is a friend, don’t worry you can trust him.” At some point, he convinced him. And this is very interesting. He said to him, “You need to become deaf-mute.” There were two armed paramilitaries behind him, and the officer was driving, the first one. He tells them that

he is my aunt's husband. But he can't even talk. And they took him to the Macedonian side as a deaf-mute. When Gazmend, we call him Mena, realized that he passed the border, he fainted.

Then, he remained in Macedonia for maybe two months, and then he came to Turkey with me and my daughter-in-law. After NATO intervened, we came back. I came back first because my brother had died. The one who remained in Mitrovica during the whole war, he saw everything that was happening and I used to talk to him on the phone. He said, "Don't worry, when you come to Mitrovica, it will be flat to the ground." It was hell when I passed by the Zveçan Chimney, the smelter always smelled like meat. That's how we ended our conversation.

A neighbor called on my late brother, there were paramilitaries and soldiers at the house of an Albanian. When they left, it was a three-story house, they left the water running. And this Serb neighbor, the moment he found out my brother was an engineer, he said, "Take those tools," the ones that can open up doors or whatever, "let's go open Syla's door because they left the water running." He got up to go there. My mother said to him, "Don't go, my son!" She intuited something. "I'll go, I'll go mother because three families will have where to come back to." He opened the door, he went in first and the poisons suffocated him. The drug poison, the gunpowder poison. They had planned all of that. And this one Serb was aware that my brother knew a lot of what went down in Mitrovica, so they planned to poison him, and he died. And so it was like that.

**Anita Susuri:** When did you come back after the war?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** When we came back after the war, we came back to Pristina. Interestingly, Pristina wasn't destroyed, they left it for the end. I came to my apartment, there was no one at the apartment because there was a family from Mitrovica, they didn't go... and nothing, we had our stores, we had wealth, everything was leveled to the ground. Our cars... one car was left in the garage, because my son had created wealth and we started, both my son and daughter started working with commerce and cosmetics. And so we remained on our feet. They're both very hard-working. Aziz was always disappointed. He had offers to work as an economist, he used to say, "No, I won't work unless the miners are also employed." And then they ended our pension. We filed a few complaints to the Republic of Serbia and they all told us, "You don't get a pension because you are irredentists." But, thank God, our children are hard-working and didn't let us struggle.

**Anita Susuri:** Mrs. Bahtije, do you have anything to add or something you have forgotten to mention?

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Thank you. I have a lot of things in my life to tell you about, but the part that is more interesting, I told it to you. Thank you!

**Anita Susuri:** Thank you a lot for your time.

**Bahtije Abrashi:** Of course, of course.