

INTERVIEW WITH IGBALLE NOVOSELLA MEHMETI

Pristina | Date: January 13, 2022

Duration: 120 minutes

Present:

1. Igballe Novosella Mehmeti (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. Igballe, if you could present yourself, tell us your birth date, birthplace, anything about your family, your origin...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: I am Igballe Novosella Mehmeti. I come from a patriotic family, and my family and I have been followed our entire lives. Imprisonments, tortures... I almost grew up in front of prison cell doors. My family... and it's not by accident, because even during the Second World War, the occupier at the time had been arrested... they had taken at least 27 members of our families, of our village, my uncle and his son amongst them. So, I was born in Vushtrri, by my mother Naile, Naile Shala.

My father is Ismajl... Novosella. Only my father's last name was Novosella because he had left the Novosella village and kept the Novosella last name. My parents moved to Vushtrri from the village of Novosella. My oldest brother was born there in Vush... in Maxhunaj, Novosella, while my mother gave birth to four other boys and myself in Vushtrri... and then another boy. So, they even named me Igballe, one sister among five brothers. My parents moved to Pristina in 1953. My mother gave birth to two other girls in Pristina. So, I grew up in Pristina since 1953. I started school...

Anita Susuri: Before continuing, I wanted to ask you about... since you mentioned [a story] about the Second World War. Do you know anything else about that story?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: That history is very undiscovered. Unfortunately, it was never revealed what happened to those boys, and their graves were never found, besides their names being passed down to the other children. At the time, it seemed somebody took their grains... they went into the villages and took their grains, and they loaded them on carriages, on horse carriages, and they took their boys with them, "They will unload the grains and they will... we will return your children to you." And they never returned, at that time... they knew nothing about them, they didn't know where it happened, what happened or didn't.

Anita Susuri: Were they taken by the Germans or Serbs?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Serbs, not Germans. Germans were saviors during that time... Serbs took them.

Anita Susuri: And why did your father leave Novosella?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: To be honest with you, my father... his mother had died young and he grew up with his stepmother, and apparently after he got married, they had a boy and... he thought he could live in the city. They referred to Vushtrri as a *shehër* [Alb.: city] (laughs). He took my mother as a young bride together with their son, "Qzim was," my mother said, "nine months old." And they went to Vushtrri.

Anita Susuri: You were about to tell us about your childhood in Pristina, the elementary school...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: I finished elementary school... we initially attended Vuk Karadžić school, which today is Elena Gjika. In the meantime, the new school Branislav Nušić was built, the Gjergj Fishta school. Believe me, they transferred half of the students, those of us who lived near there, to that school, so I finished elementary school at the then Branislav Nušić, at Gjergj Fishta [today]. I enrolled in school... {coughs} excuse me. We were still in elementary school in '68... my brother was imprisoned in '64, and that's when the horror began for my family. My brother, Sabri, had his wife and his six month old son, Lir... he was imprisoned. [He was] in the same organization with Adem Demaçi.¹ He left his baby son and his wife; he was sentenced to nine years.

While my brother Selatin in the same year... was sentenced for sewing 90 flags because when he appeared in court... he was sentenced because he was a tailor by profession. Selatin was imprisoned while he was a normalist [Shkolla Normale attendee], they kept him for about two months and expelled him from school. In the meantime, Selatin finished *Shkolla Normale*.² He enrolled in the Faculty of Philosophy, got engaged, and... the demonstrations of '68³ took place. And I don't know what to say about my childhood. It was about the imprisonments the whole time, to prepare [care] packages, to send them to prison, to visit our brothers... that was my childhood.

¹ Adem Demaçi (1936-2018) was an Albanian writer and politician and longtime political prisoner who spent a total of 27 years in prison for his nationalist beliefs and political activities. In 1998 he became the head of the political wing of the Kosovo Liberation Army, from which he resigned in 1999.

² 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.

³ During October and November 1968, many demonstrations were organized by the Albanian population across Kosovo. The main demand was to recognize Kosovo's right to self-determination. The first and most massive demonstration was organized in Prizren on October 6, 1968. This demonstration ended in front of the League of Prizren, where for the first time the demand for the Kosovo Republic was publicly articulated.

It was about stuff like this, we had the brides at home, the children without one parent... there was my mother who took the most care, [while] my father was a farmer by profession. In the meantime, my brother Bedri grew up. He generally dealt with everyone, and I thank him publicly. He dealt with our education, taking care, raising our brothers' children, sometimes with one, sometimes with the other, taking us to prison [for visits], and sending them the packages. Because Selatin was sentenced to nine years, he left his young bride, and she waited for him for five years. He was in prison for five years. We prepared the bride and we got her ready for the wedding. Selatin got out of prison on Thursday, and they got married on Sunday. It was a great joy.

That is what we, our family, dealt with in a way, since '73, since Selatin was released from prison in '73 and Sabri was still in prison. It was a sort of life, how to put it, we were a few but all together. At that time, a little after, Bedri got married as well, and I got married too in '75. Selatin was out of prison, by the end of the year, they had Valon. Valon was born on November 28, and then he talked about the torture, "Who is Valon and why on November 28?" "Well, my son was born on November 28 at the hospital. I didn't register him myself." After one year, Donika was born. And Selatin was imprisoned on September 15 again at Adem Demaçi's organization. The young bride was left alone, but this time with two children. Horror after horror again, suffering the whole time. We didn't celebrate holidays, we were distressed on every Eid. My mother was the one who used to say, "Hopefully only this year, hopefully only this... this New Year's Eve, and then we'll come together."

After I got married, I gave birth to my son after two years. Sabri was imprisoned again for the Gjakova wedding. He was imprisoned, and sentenced to two years. His wife and young children were alone again. So, the horrors, the imprisonments didn't... they had no stopping for our family. In... I gave birth... I gave birth to Kushtrim first, and then Jashar, who we gave his grandfather's name because... my husband's father died and we gave him his name, and at the end, all three of us gave birth... all of my friends, in '82. After the demonstrations in '81,⁴ they referred to Albanian women as machines who don't know what to do anything else but give birth. And angrily, we all said, "You know what, all of us will birth another one" (laughs).

I consulted with Mekuli, she was a good doctor, a gynecologist...

Anita Susuri: Sadete Mekuli...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Yes, Sadete Mekuli. And she asked, "How many children do you have?" I said, "I have two sons, but I want another one." She hugged me, "This is the type of woman we need" (laughs). And it's surprising, all of our friend group, about five or six of us, gave birth to boys at that

⁴ 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.

time (smiles). It was '81, and the demonstrations of '81 took place. Imprisonments and tortures in our family again.

[The interview was interrupted here]

Anita Susuri: You were talking about '79.

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti:

'79, my brother Sabri's wife was young, she had five children. He [Sabri] had heard that he was at risk of being imprisoned. One night, a well-known physician, was on his way back from his night shift, since my brother was a tailor at the time, he said... The physician was Ramadan Xhema, he said, "I had two UDB-ashes⁵ in the hospital last night, and they told me that they have a big task tomorrow because they will imprison someone from the Novosella family." At that time, my brother had decided not to give up. He said, "I am not capable of bearing prison tortures now. "I have prepared a poison in my pocket, and if they catch me, I will kill myself."

[The interview was interrupted here]

Anita Susuri: Mrs. Igballe, you mentioned that as a child, you often went to visit your brothers in prison and sent them food. What was that time period like, how did you prepare for that, how did you go there, how did you feel as a child?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: How does... how does a child feel when they go to visit their brother in prison? First of all, the visits... actually we only sent them clothes twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays. Oftentimes, when we got their unwashed clothes, they had blood stains on them from the tortures in prison. The visits were once every two weeks. We tried to coordinate who to go this time, who to go that time. I often remember the prison bars, like wires, often (gets teary) My mother used to say, "Stick one finger out so I can touch you" {touches her finger}, you know, since there was no possibility to hold hands or talk properly. For years on end, sometimes one, sometimes the other, it also happened that both were [in prison]. Oftentimes, the bags we used to prepare at home, it happened that after all the effort to prepare them, they used to check the kilograms, there was a limit, I don't exactly remember. They would throw half the things away, "You brought more than it is allowed."

Anita Susuri: Which jail was he at?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: (Sighs) In which one? Which prison did they not go to (laughs). Mainly in Pristina's prison, when they were imprisoned, they were sent straight to Pristina's prison. And then, for a long time, Selatin was in Prizren's prison. Selatin was in Požarevac's prison for many years. I

⁵ Members of the UDB, *Uprava državne bezbednosti* (State Security Administration), with the additional "a" for *armije*, Yugoslav army.

remember it like it was today, it was cold, and the winters there are really tough. We had to go from Pristina to Fushë Kosova, and then get on a train in Fushë Kosova. And then to get on the bus to Belgrade, stop on the way, and then go to Požarevac. From Požarevac, [to] Zabela, which was the place where the prison was because we... we went to Zabela from Požarevac once, it was really cold. We happened to go together with Adem Demaçi's sister, Ajshe. We were freezing, and the wind hit us from the sides in the carriage, so it was...

Anita Susuri: You went there by carriage?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: From Požarevac to Zabela. Požarevac and Zabela have a distance between them similar to that of Pristina and Fushë Kosova, it was really cold, and there was no... While from Pristina to Fushë Kosova by train... by bus. From the bus... we got on a bus to Belgrade and stopped in Požarevac on the way. And then in Požarevac, we waited to go by something, to go...

Anita Susuri: To the prison.

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Yes, to the prison. The prison was in Zabela.

Anita Susuri: Who did you usually go with?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: We visited in order. When I went, I went with my mother, sometimes my father would go too. At times... later on, when we bought the car, my brother Bedri bought it, he took the children and the brides by car. Since we didn't have a car at first, and then my brother took them... For some time, later on, Selatin served his second imprisonment... in Mitrovica. They [prison workers] were so heinous in Mitrovica, I remember like it was today, they were mainly Albanian. I remember like it was today, Valon was little, and when we went, it was me, my mother, and Elife, the bride, holding her son. When we went to the door... I wasn't going in that time around, my mother and Elife would. At the door, they said, "Visiting is not allowed for children." They didn't allow the boy. He cried so much, and he wouldn't let go of his mother. So, I had to go in for the visit. The bride and her son stayed in the car, they didn't allow them to go in. They said children weren't allowed, and they didn't let them go in with the child.

Anita Susuri: Your brothers, you told us about the flags they sewed, but what were the activities... the activities they did?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Adem Demaçi was our neighbor, we only had three or four houses in between (smiles). And they grew up together and spent their youth together. He formed organizations. And he asked who wanted [to join] willingly, my brother organized and wrote slogans, held meetings and organized gatherings. And they made the decision to sew flags to distribute throughout Kosovo on a specific day. My brother was a tailor at the time, and he had sewed 90 flags, and on the same day, young people, school students had somehow organized and distributed them throughout Kosovo.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned that you were here in Pristina, you lived near Mister Demaçi. What was that neighborhood like, you said you lived somewhere near [Hotel] Božur...⁶

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Ah, no, I [lived near] Božur when I got married.

Anita Susuri: What about when you were a child, where did you live?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: We lived... now it's Afrim Loxha street. I actually feel good because Afrim Loxha was a close friend of my brother. There was Rijeka street near Dodon theater, one of my brothers now lives in front of it. The other left, [but] I went there as a child and I grew up there, in that neighborhood. And Adem was our neighbor. My father was a farmer back then, he worked with farming. I remember like it was today every time I sent a bucket with... of onions, a bucket of potatoes to... to share it with others because the circumstances were different back then and especially *inxhja*⁷ Naza, Adem Demaçi's mother and his wife, Xhemajlia, who was left with her children and difficult conditions and so... we sent them stuff since our family we had some agricultural products.

Anita Susuri: How was life in general, I mean social as well, at the time, how did you spend your time? For example, I am not talking about the activities, but besides that, what kind of life did your family lead?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: To be honest our family had a normal life... a normal life. My father was a farmer, and then we started school, and my younger brother got a job. Financially, we were always fine. My mother never allowed our house to turn into... all the time, my mother was the one to upkeep [the mood], "We are okay, it will happen." She had that pride that she felt, "My sons are in prisons," that pride kept us going. Believe me, we never cried in our house, we didn't mourn, we didn't... as children without a father, we were more proud than all the other children in the neighborhood. Although there were a lot of them who didn't talk to us, you know, "You are ruining our Brotherhood-Unity." But, we stood still and had our conviction.

I remember like it was today, Selatin's fiancée remained with us, and my mother made us sing to her because we would take her in as a bride. And... and she used to teach us the songs. Her name is Elife, "Elie you beauty, you've been waiting for your husband for five years. He's been in captivity for five years to make Kosovo [unite with] Albania." Trust me when I crossed the border for the first time to go to Albania, I said out loud, "Oh mother, Kosovo has become Albania. You are not here to see, but we are going to Albania and coming back freely." So, our house and our family stood...

I forgot something else, every imprisonment, my mother turned up the volume... we had those round cassettes. She liked listening to folklorist music, patriotic music. And when she saw that the house would fill up with cops, she would turn up the radio volume. But all these small children that we

⁶ Hotel Božur, a Pristina landmark, was the first hotel in the city. Today, it has been turned into the Swiss Diamond Hotel on Mother Teresa Boulevard.

⁷ *Inxhe* is an endearing and respectful Albanian term for an older woman.

raised, none of them grew up without being unraveled {pretends she's unraveling something with her hands}. They even checked their clothes and their diapers, in case they would find any hostile materials, in case they would find anything written. So many clothes, and the bedrooms, everything was trashed. It was terrible, worse than in the movies. That's what it was like, but despite that, we still held on firmly, very...

Anita Susuri: You mentioned that you had neighbors and other people who accused you of ruining Brotherhood-Unity...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Yes.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask you something more related to that. Were the neighbors who said that nearby or...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Well to be honest with you, there were both ones that were nearby and further away, and there were people who only got me near the house, they didn't dare to come close to the door, from fear because these were all things that required big responsibility, you know, if someone saw you hanging out with [us], or visiting [us], my close family was always followed, my husband too... he was followed going to work, and coming back. So, they followed us a lot at the time, there was a big risk, and people would get imprisoned for one thing they said. So, there were people who were scared.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember in '68, the demonstrations? Surely your brothers were there, but I think you were very little but...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: I was little, but I took part at the time. [I was] little, but I took part. It was November 28, there was light snow. I knew there were organizations taking place in houses, at our house, all those friends that were later imprisoned had hung out at your house, had eaten at our house, had drank... my mother would prepare things. And it was terrible, my brother Sabri came back, and he said, "The city has become terrible. Please go ask [maternal] uncle Hakif for a revolver." We had an uncle (laughs). And as a child I went and asked, "Uncle Hakif, Sabri sent me to ask for... a gun." you know. "Go away," he said, "go home" (laughs). He yelled at me, "Go home, what gun are you talking about." It became a big deal, at the time there were murders, murders began happening. Murat Mehmeti was murdered that day. It was terrible. And they began imprisoning people. At that time, Selatin was imprisoned, as an organizer of the demonstrations. Nine people were imprisoned. He was imprisoned... he was sentenced to nine years in prison.

Anita Susuri: Was '68 the first time he was imprisoned?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: No, it was also '64. Selatin was imprisoned while he was a normalist, but he was a minor so they only gave him two or three months. And they expelled him from school that year, but he then privately finished it and graduated. In '68 he was a student, he got... he got his

indeks.⁸ And he got engaged. They made it official because at the time they would get engaged... he didn't know her, Selatin didn't even know her. She met him through letters in prison. We could send letters once a month and my mother would make me write them. She would dictate it word by word since my mother couldn't write... and lastly, we would leave a piece for Selatin's wife to write it and she would close the envelope so we wouldn't read her part (laughs)... so we wouldn't read her part of the letter, and we would send it to Selatin.

Anita Susuri: So they met in prison.

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Yes, actually yes. We... we had a sort of friendship since my brother's wife had a cousin, but they never talked to each other. That's why my mother said to immediately take the bride, with the guests that would come to see Selatin. We took her to a tailor and made clothes... we did everything because we were good financially. And we prepared her bedroom and everything and we took the bride immediately on Sunday.

Anita Susuri: How was it, maybe you also discussed it, I am sure you did... how was it like for them, how did they feel for example?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: They felt a really great pride. You know, that's what kept them going. The brides and the children and everyone. Our house wasn't miserable, there wasn't mourning. When... he got out of prison... he was surrounded by probably 15 cops. But when Selatin was released, we didn't come back crying. My mother was brave, she was a *burrnesha*,⁹ she said, "They will release him tomorrow. I am proud of what my sons are in prison for." So, that pride kept their wives going too because it was difficult to be engaged and wait for someone without knowing them, without knowing if she should wait for a man in prison for five years... but, that pride always kept them going.

Anita Susuri: Could you tell us now about how you joined *llegale*¹⁰ and these groups?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: To be honest with you, even my husband didn't know as of late (laughs). I was... I was a young woman. I was maybe the oldest girl in the family. I was strongly connected with my brothers the whole time. And I didn't know I was part of that group or organization until later. There was Metush Krasniqi who was the head of that organization. There was Shefki... Shefqet Strovci, he was from Strovci... Shefqet Jashari and my brother Sabri. And he brought a pile of documents to write [with a typewriter]. "Do you know how to use it?" "Yes, *more*,"¹¹ because I had finished Economics

⁸ *Indeks* were personal booklets issued to students under the old university system. It was used both as a student ID and grade register. *Indeks* issued in the '90s had "Kosovo Republic" written on them. Very often Albanian students were mistreated by Serbian police if found with the *indeks*.

⁹ The Albanian term *burrnesha* literally means men-like, but can refer to women's show of courage, wittiness, or general disregard for social roles that often limit women's participation in the public space.

¹⁰ Constellation of underground militant groups fighting for Kosovo separation from Yugoslavia and unification with Albania during Tito's Yugoslavia.

¹¹ Colloquial: used to emphasize the sentence, it expresses strong emotion.

school and we had a subject in which we learned how to use a typewriter... and so I knew how to use it.

And he brought a pile of documents once, twice. And he said, "It's better if you don't tell Fadil." I said, "No *more*, Fadil doesn't know anything" (laughs). This happened often when my son Kushtrim was little, he would pick him up and send him to his mother while I was here writing the documents. And it was a problem about how we would tear the handwritten document so it couldn't be traced. Oftentimes we ripped them by hand, in small pieces, and threw them in the toilet, so they couldn't be traced...

And then I had to report, from time to time, about what happened. I didn't know anymore when exactly I had to report, but I had the [phone] numbers appointed. And then I was thinking about where to hide the phone number. I didn't dare to write them in a pocket notebook... and I couldn't learn them by heart, there were too many names. And I think it is a good method [to store secret information] at the exterior part of the door frame, when you opened the door, I had some phone numbers written down, and my brother would have me phone them, "This happened today, these many flags were raised in Kosovo, that meeting will take place today." And until...

And I thought it'd be a good method

Anita Susuri: So for example, you didn't know who you were reporting to, only...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: I didn't know at all because those were things that nobody could know. Until the last day, when Sabri left Kosovo, and he actually took off from my house. He said, "Notify them that Sabri left Kosovo and delete those phone numbers." And I didn't know what happened next at all. I notified them, and I said, "Sabri left Kosovo today."

Anita Susuri: Before this, so before getting married, was there any other activity you did, were you always active?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: I was always active to be honest with you, maybe without even knowing [what I was doing] for sure, but I always did what they told me, "Go there, take this, do that," I was always active.

Anita Susuri: How did you get married, how did you meet your husband?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: (Laughs) I don't know what to tell you, I... (laughs). My burning desire to go to school, my desire to contribute to my homeland, those marriages weren't with love like they are today. As soon as I finished high school I got a job at the Highway and Regional Roads Enterprise Put [name of company]. And after about a year, after... after about three years, a coworker of mine came and said, "I met with Fadil..." My husband's name is Fadil (laughs). "He is a friend of mine," and he went to his house and I went back to my office. He called me on the phone and asked, "Could we

meet?” [I asked,] “With whom?” (laughs). “Where are you from?” He said, “I am Fadil Mehmeti.” “Where are you from?” He said, “I am from LLap.” “*Auuu* {onomatopoeia} you people from Llap are like nettle seeds” you know (laughs). And [I said] “let’s see.”

And then we met maybe two times, the third time I said, “This is me. If you want to have anything more with me, address my brother, his store is there. If they agree, I have nothing against it.” So, I liked him as a person (laughs), I can’t... It was destiny, and then I got engaged at my house. I was engaged for a few months. And we set a date for the wedding (laughs). And then we became friends, we were friends more than lovers. And we got along well. My husband...

Anita Susuri: Did you tell your husband, or did he already know about your family...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: He knew about my family and everything. And many people told me, “He won’t dare to take you for his wife.” I said, “It’s not a big deal, if he does then fine, if he doesn’t...” (laughs). “He won’t dare to marry you.” “Many people,” he said, “told me, ‘I will buy you a *zamelë*,¹² and come visit you in prison with it because you are becoming an in-law with the Novosella family and they will imprison you” (laughs). But actually, they didn’t take him to prison, but he went after their work his whole life.

Anita Susuri: But your husband and his family, they weren’t involved or...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: No, no, no, no, they weren’t. No, they weren’t. But to be honest with you, they didn’t oppose them, and I don’t think I could live with a person who is against them. He loved them. Nationalism, irredentism. But, he was the kind of person who only minded his business. He was a professor of pedagogy. And then he worked at the Social Security Agency. When we got married, he was a journalist, they had a newspaper that was published every two weeks. He was later made editor-in-chief of that newspaper. Until the end when they fired him too. At the end he was fired in front of everyone, he had written an article about the poisonings,¹³ when the poisonings happened in Kosovo. He had found an article written by someone in Austria, which is true that there were poisonings in Kosovo. His director read it and said, “Take it back, immediately.” He said, “No, I can’t take it back. Deny it, if it’s not true, you deny it.” But, he was among the first to be fired.

Part Two

¹² Old gun.

¹³ In March 1990, after Kosovo schools were segregated along ethnic lines, thousands of Albanian students fell ill with symptoms of gas poisoning. No reliable investigation was conducted by the authorities, who always maintained no gas was used in Kosovo and that the phenomenon must have been caused by mass hysteria. The authorities also impeded independent investigations by foreign doctors, and to this day, with the exception of a publication in *The Lancet* that excludes poisoning, there are only contradictory conclusions on the nature and the cause of the phenomenon. For this see Julie Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a war*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1999.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to go back to high school a bit, [could you] tell us something about Pristina as well but also the social life, the school, how did you spend your time back then?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: To be honest with you, I think we had more fun at the time than the youth are having today (laughs). We were satisfied with a few things. I always walked to the Economics School. From... my house was near Dodona theater where it still is today and I always walked to the Economics School. We were five girls. 33 students, the others were boys and only five girls. I had more friends who were boys than girls (laughs). I was a good student. Whoever had to be tested and graded, would call me, "Will you please come to sit with me for this class?"

There were times when all the students skipped a class, "We don't like it." We had a professor, he had four subjects and we didn't have books. I was in the administration department, we had to take notes. And one time, two times, and one day we got angry, "Will we skip this one?" We all skipped it. And we went out. There were fields, since the Economics School was in the middle of a field, there were no buildings but... We lit up a big fire and roasted corn, we had fun (laughs), we had fun for the whole class timespan. On our way back...

Anita Susuri: In which part?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: '70, '69, '70... I finished high school in '71.

Anita Susuri: I mean in which part of Pristina was it?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: The Economics School was in Lakrishte [neighborhood]. I think it's still there even today, in Lakrishte. On our way back from school all the students were singing, coming through the city until here at Tre Sheshirat [neighborhood], until there, there was nothing on that side. It was not built up yet, all fields. When we arrived on that side it felt like we arrived home, because it was... you know, warmer because it had houses. We came back singing together till... Pristina was different, it wasn't like it is today. There were fewer buildings, fewer spaces... more green spaces.

*Korzo*¹⁴ was trendy back then, going to *korzo* in the evening dressed up. And one evening I wanted to go out, "Where are you going?" I had a friend, I used to say, "Now that we have grown up together we are also getting old together," and we are still friends. My brother asked, "Where are you going?" I said, "I am going out at *korzo*." "What are you looking for there?" "Please *bre*¹⁵ *bac*,"¹⁶ we call our brother *bac*. I said, "Now it's *vaksuz* [evening]." We call it *vaksuz*, you know, as in before dinner. It's that time maybe from 7 pm to 9 pm max... we used to come back home at nine. I said, "Come see it *bac*, they cleaned the street up, the linden trees have bloomed."

¹⁴ Main street, reserved for pedestrians.

¹⁵ Colloquial: used to emphasize the sentence, it expresses strong emotion.

¹⁶ *Bac*, literally uncle, is an endearing and respectful term for an older person.

It was the time of lindens, they were good lindens, across the *korzo*, they smelled nice. “We will smell them, we’ll see who wore what, we will see who is passing by (laughs). And it’s evening now, I can’t even study, and I can’t do any embroidery,” because we used to embroider, and make *qeiz*,¹⁷ she [my friend] would say, “You made me like it too now I want to go out every day with you” (laughs). It was a pleasure to hang out with friends and...

Anita Susuri: You told me about when a friend saw you with luggage...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: (Laughs) It was summertime, and people usually went to the sea. We weren’t thinking of the sea, we were preoccupied with the issue of our brothers. Which one is in prison, which one we should prepare a care package for, where is... I got two large bags. I think at the same time, both Selatin and Sabri were in prison. I had two large bags and was on my way. I ran into a friend in the city, at the square, she said, “Where are you going?” The prison was where it still is today. We lived next to Dodona and usually went... We had the right [to visit them] twice a week, Mondays and Thursdays, to send them clothes. When we visited every two weeks, we would send them food as well.

I was carrying two bags, I was walking, and she asked, “Igballe, what’s up?” I said, “Not much, you?” “Are you going on vacation?” I said, “Yes.” “You will have fun.” I said, “Yes, yes, I hope you will have fun just like I will,” you know. She didn’t quite understand [what I meant]. I was going to prison to send packages. I said, “I hope you will have fun just like I will.” So, for us at the time... it didn’t bother us that we couldn’t go on vacation, that wasn’t our issue, for us, we... we would go to our [paternal] uncle sometimes, and at our [maternal] uncle at other times during the summer. In other words, we were worried about our family members, the children were small, the wives were without husbands, we were not thinking of going on vacation or anything.

Anita Susuri: When you went... when you went to prisons to send them stuff, did you fear for anything or did you think anything bad would happen to you?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: To be honest, my mind never went there, you know. For me, it wasn’t important how I would find them or what I would hear. It was terrible when we would get my brother’s unwashed laundry, both of my brothers, oftentimes with blood stains. It was terrible, we knew it was because of the tortures. So, we never had fear. Even today, and at that time, I don’t know what fear is, so I never know what it’s like to say I’m scared. Maybe life conditions, maybe circumstances, matured us too soon, and made us brave. That’s what it is.

Anita Susuri: You also mentioned you went to the cinema often, there was Kino Rinia at the time.

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Yes, going to Kino Rinia with friends was trendy at the time, going early, buying seeds and going there. We went there once with Fadil (laughs) after we got engaged, we went to the cinema and... Surprisingly (laughs), when we went to get tickets, Fadil had forgotten his wallet

¹⁷ Clothes and embroideries that fill up the bride’s trousseau.

in a different pocket. And it was a funny moment. So we went there often, there was nothing else [to do] actually. To go out in *korzo*, go to a sweet shop. Arabeska [restaurant] was where Swiss Diamond is now.

My first time going to a restaurant was with Fadil. And surprisingly I ran into everyone there... and my friend. Our husbands had known each other well (laughs) and we were not aware of it. She was dating him, and I went out with Fadil for the first time. "Will we go?" "We will go to Arabeska." I don't know, Arabeska's seating was in booths {demonstrates an arch with her hands} you know like...? And all four of us [sat there]. I knew many jokes and I joked a lot as a young woman.

And my friend and I began laughing about how our husbands knew each other and we weren't aware. And we laughed a lot. And my friend's husband said, "With us," he said, "the train moves but it sometimes stops in stations," you know (laughs). I said, "Well our train is express and doesn't... it doesn't stop at any station" (laughs). So, walks around the *korzo* were usual. I got together with friends, we sometimes went on a picnic. We went to Gërmia, we walked there. I think those things were more fun because we had fun with little things. And when it became eight-ten at night, we went back home.

Anita Susuri: What kind of films did you usually watch? What kind of films were shown?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: To be honest, there were some, some Indian films. For us, it was more important to see some kind of patriotic film. Maybe it was instilled in our mind that sort of idea and we wanted to see patriotic films, but there were rarely any shown. We also watched romance films... At the time we also went to the theater a lot. When there was a theatrical show, we especially took our brothers' wives there, and we would sew dresses for them because we went to the theater wearing a gown. We went to the theater wearing a long, black dress. We went there to see every theatrical show they played.

Anita Susuri: You also mentioned that there were films from Albania in Kino Rinia...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: There were. There were films from Albania. Besides now and then when there was a [new] film, telling your friends that there is a new film was a thing, and then we went to see it. And it was very joyful for us when Albania was somehow mentioned, whatever it was. Maybe because we dedicated our entire selves to the liberation of Kosovo, as nationalists, as irredentists. That's what kept us going, that we would unite with Albania, that Albania is our motherland. Although the situation there wasn't that good, but that's what kept us going...

Anita Susuri: Do you remember the first time you watched a film in Albanian, in which they spoke Albanian?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: {Sighs} I don't remember. I don't remember when I watched one for the first time. But there were, we watched films in Albanian at Kino Rinia, but I don't remember when the first one was. But, we watched films in Albanian at Kino Rinia.

Anita Susuri: Were there any other activities, for example, there were some events like a ball, like dances which were organized?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: To be honest I didn't participate in those, I didn't. But of course, there were [events like that], balls and stuff, but for me, while growing up it was... when I became a student there was the *korzo* because you don't go to *korzo* as a child. But I was a regular once I became a student. On our way back from school we used to stop by a sweet shop, and we would joke around. We used to go on the weeke... we used to go to Gërmia, all friends of the neighborhood would get together.

[The interview was interrupted here]

Anita Susuri: You talked about your tough, I mean, high school period. And we talked about Kino Rinia. If you would like to tell us anything else you remember from that time.

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: To be honest, there were many cases, we also experienced good ones, although my brothers were in prison, we still continued living a normal life. I was very close to my friends both in school and after school. Going out in the city and walking around, going to the cinema to watch a film and then walking back from school, the way back from school was a joy, all friends together. There were cases when there were imprisonments, they were difficult, and they were sad, but we used to overcome them.

At home, we used to do handcrafts, since at the time we didn't have iPhones (laughs) like now. We usually spent our free time embroidering and making lace. I still have an eight-meter curtain which I made by hand. I even embroidered at the office and I would close the drawer {pretends she's closing the drawer}, making lace {pretends she's embroidering}. When the director or someone came in to call me, I would close the drawer. That's how we spent our time. We used to visit our relatives, our [paternal] aunt, and our aunt's daughter. That's how the youth spent their time back then. It wasn't like today. That's what it was.

Anita Susuri: You also went to university, was it immediately after or...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Yes, I enrolled immediately [after high school], but I graduated late. I got employed immediately. I had a scholarship at the Highway and Regional Roads Enterprise. They would give away scholarships at the time and I won it from the Economics high school. And then, I graduated, and there was a need for interns. So I was accepted as an intern and then I got the job. I attended the first year [of university], but it was impossible to continue. I had classes at three, but my work shift was from seven to three.

I remember like it was today, I had a problem with the director. He said, “If you want, work, if you want to go to university, go to university.” And the directors were different back then. There was a case once, I don’t want to mention the director’s name, he said, “Go call...” for some time I worked as a secretary for the director. Now they refer to that differently, nobody says secretary, [they say] assistant (laughs). Back then it was called a secretary, and he said, “Go call the typist.” I went to look for her, but she wasn’t there. I came back and didn’t say anything.

After some time he asked, “Didn’t you go yet? Go call her.” And I had no other choice, I said, “She wasn’t in the office.” [He said] “What do you mean she’s not in the office?” “Well boss, I don’t know, she wasn’t in the office.” [He said] “Come to my office,” I went in. “You keep track of who leaves when, and when they come back. {pretends she’s writing} I will make it possible that you attend university.” I said, “What? In my job description, it doesn’t say that I become a spy. I have specific duties, I won’t become anyone’s spy.”

He made a hand gesture, “May you be of use.” When he said that, I turned, “May I be of use to you? I am a married woman, I will never be of use to you.” I knew his intention in saying that (laughs). He shouted “Get her out of my office!” Because they changed my job position (laughs). I was arrogant at first, with that confidence of mine and I grew old the same, I don’t know (laughs) {shrugs}. Maybe since I grew up as a girl with only brothers and I was, maybe nature itself makes a person like this.

Anita Susuri: What was it like for you to balance all of this? Your activism, your family life, school, and work?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: I don’t know maybe when someone focuses on finishing the work. Even today if you pick up something, you give yourself a number of tasks, and then nothing seems difficult. I tried to keep busy all the time, to work on embroidery and go to work and raise children and build a house and... And then there were some credits set aside [for the workers] where I worked, they gave us land on loan. I made a request and they gave me land. And then the issue was how to pay it off. Both of us [my husband and I] had income, but my brother [also] helped. My younger brother Bedri helped with the loan until we got the credits and we got the land on loan.

We had a small apartment near [Hotel] Božur, which I told you about [addresses the interviewer]. My brother-in-law was the first engineer in Llap, Refik Mehmeti. He came that night to hang out and he stayed at our place till late. He said, “Congratulations on getting this [apartment].” It was a one-room apartment, 35 square meters. I had my son Kushtrim and I was pregnant, my belly had grown. I said, “No, don’t congratulate us for this at all, we will hopefully leave here and get our own house.” [He said] “You can’t get your own house.” He spent all night calculating what’s the participation, what’s the interest, how much we would have to pay, “You can’t.” At some point, he said, “You won’t be able to afford food,” you know, “if you get a loan.” I said, “Refik, save it, save it, I decided. They set the land aside for me, we will get a loan. I will give Fadil’s entire wage for the loan, and we will live through

mine.” I said, “I will live better than you” (laughs). He had three children and his wife didn’t work, I said, “I will live better than you.”

So, we started to build a house, it’s the house I still have today, through debts and loans, and... But, when... I made all the curtains and the lampshades at the time... I worked for money, I would embroider lace for money and went to work [on top of it]. And I would cook for the construction workers a hundred times because at the time you had to feed them even if they put a brick on, it wasn’t like today. There were cases when I prepared their lunch in the middle of the night, I boiled the beans, I prepared their breakfast, I prepared salads for them. “Fadil, take everything and send it to the construction workers,” from there [our apartment] to Dragodan, since we started building our house in Dragodan. And the house was finished in the meantime.

Anita Susuri: So, the imprisonments of your family members, your father, and brothers always followed you. You mentioned that in ‘75...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Selatin was imprisoned in ‘75.

Anita Susuri: And one of your brother’s sons...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: No, he was sentenced in ‘76. Ilir, who was seven months old when his father went to prison, he was a minor, [but later] he used to work at a store, he’s a photographer now since he didn’t know [how to sew], he wasn’t a tailor, and he was imprisoned. He was sentenced to two years, he endured many tortures, and many sufferings. He was in prison in Peja. It was terrible for the family, and he got released in ‘79. No, he was imprisoned in ‘81, in ‘80... after the demonstrations of ‘81, I’m sorry, I have mixed it up.

Anita Susuri: Your brother’s son?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: My brother’s son, yes. While Selatin was sentenced in ‘75, he left his wife with two children.

Anita Susuri: If you could now talk about ‘79 when...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: When Sabri left Kosovo, yes...

Anita Susuri: How did it come down to that? What happened?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Sabri actually never cut his ties with the *Illegale* movement. He always worked on it. Whoever needed anything went to Sabri, the meetings took place at his store, at Sabri’s store. He worked as a tailor and told all the students, “Whoever graduates,” he said, “I will sew your costume for free.” There weren’t many people who bought costumes at the time, [he said] “You bring the fabric and I will sew the costume for free to every student who graduates.” It was around the end of

December, they had decided to imprison more people in Kosovo, and they had decided to imprison Sabri as well. That night, Ramadan Xhema, he was a physician at the hospital, on his way back from work late at night, had gone to Sabri and told him, “Last night two UDB-ashes were there, they drank too much *raki*¹⁸ and got sick, and said, ‘we have to get better, we have a big task tomorrow, we will go and imprison someone from the Novosella family.’”

Sabri, after returning from the store, told our mother, “I am at risk of being imprisoned and I decided to not let them catch me.” At that time he was a bit older. He said, “And if I’m imprisoned I cannot bear the tortures there.” But, he said, “I want to... I decided to drink poison if they catch me, I have it in my pocket,” since he was a tailor, in the small pocket, the watch pocket. [They discussed] “What can we do? Let’s go to Igballe.” Late at night, it was both of them, I heard the doorbell ring, when I got out, it was my mother together with Sabri. “Come in, welcome. Do you want anything to eat?” They said, “We have eaten and everything, but this is what’s happening. We will sleep over here tonight.” They said, “And if they surround the house, we told Bedri to notify us,” our younger brother. They said, “Bedri will notify us, to tell us that mother is sick if the phone rings.” I made their beds, and they both slept.

They usually imprisoned people early in the morning, around eight. And on Thursdays, I don’t why they arrested our family members on Thursdays. And that day was Thursday too. And around six, the phone rang. I answered the phone, my brother said, “We are surrounded.” I hung up the phone and went to the room where they were sleeping. My brother had already put his clothes on, he had woken up, he was sitting. It’s interesting, his dreams predict things a lot. Even today when he sees a dream he says, “I saw this in a dream,” he says, “I knew it.” He got up and said, “I don’t want them to catch me, I decided to run away.” My mother said, I remember my mother told him, “Don’t leave, don’t leave Sabri.”

He had his wife with five children at home. He said, “Mother if they don’t catch me, they will kill me or I will kill myself.” “No big deal,” my mother said, “even if they kill you I will bury you as a hero of Kosovo.” But, he had decided to leave and said, “Fadil, where are you taking me?” Fadil fortunately was traveling that day, he had a meeting in Kaçanik. He said, “I will take you to Dumnicë, brother. I don’t know where else to take you.” Back then taking Sabri somewhere put Fadil at risk for being imprisoned, and would put his whole family at risk. They got into the car and he sent him to Dumnicë, since he is from there, that’s where his family was. And he said to the girls, “Keep him in a room so nobody sees him, until we find a solution about where Sabri could go.”

Sabri was in Dumnicë that night, while we went back to our home in Pristina. They would check every day, looking for Sabri. They checked at our uncle’s [houses] in the village, in Novosella. They had looked for him at our aunt’s daughter, in our families. We were surrounded on every corner, they were checking, they guarded our house, our brothers’ houses. Always undercover, nobody would wear the uniform because then we would recognize them. And then, we realized that he was at risk because they will check for him everywhere, so we had to move Sabri from there. Where would he go? We

¹⁸ *Raki* is a very common alcoholic drink made from distillation of fermented fruit.

decided to take him to Dumnicë... to take him to Drenica, to one of my brother's friends, Fuat Hajdini, he is still alive. And he said, "I will take him to one of my uncles." And then I had to go call Fuat.

I was the one, who always insisted, "This must be done." My son, he was born in May. How long is it from May to December? He was about seven months old. I picked him up in my arms and I went to Fuat. [I was thinking] How do I bring him out, how do I tell his wife? I said, "Fuat, your sister-in-law is really sick at home, her husband isn't there and her children are alone, they're not doing well. Fadil is traveling for work, my brothers weren't available, and I have nobody to go with. Would you mind taking me there?" He said, "Of course, *more*." He stood up immediately because he knew he had to come. And we got out with my son in my arms. He said, "You have to let them know at home that we can't take him to Drenica because my uncle said, 'It's not a problem he [Sabri] can come and stay as much as he wants,' but I can't secretly host him." And if you hosted him openly that day, that would be enough to get you in prison.

So I had to go back home one more time. Those images, it's like the ones we see in the movies. "I left," I said, "my son in the car with Fuat and came back home." They were looking around everyone, I knew they were guarding. We had two doors, since we kept livestock, and the main door. So I entered [the house] from the other door. And we talked to them, they said, "Sabri should decide where to go. We know what to do, but we definitely have to move him from there tonight." Now I was thinking about how to leave the house, they would recognize me. I wore a long coat and I put on a scarf {pretends she's putting on a scarf} so I would be unrecognizable.

I left the house on the other side, there's an alley in the park's direction, from my house {describes the directions with hands} from Dodona, it connects to the park, and that's where I met with Fuat and my son. He said that the boy was crying and someone came up and asked him "Why is your child crying?" He had replied, "My wife forgot something at home, [I'm waiting for her] and we want to send him to a doctor." It was dangerous even for Fuat at the time if people found out where he was going and what he was doing. His car color was dark blue, just like the police cars, I don't know if they were [Zastava]¹⁹ 128 or 101 or... that's what the police cars were like. And we went straight to Dumnicë with him. When we got near the house, our car color was like the police, so they were shocked thinking it might be the police. But, they saw that it fortunately wasn't. I hugged my brother there for the last time, and after that, I didn't see him for maybe twelve years.

And he left, he had a revolver and put it at the back of his pants {pretends she's putting something at the back}, he put on a hat, he had one of those black hats that were long. And he got in the car with Fuat, I remained in Dumnicë and slept over there that night together with my son. It was terrible because we didn't know what would happen. Fuat and Sabri were together, he [Sabri] said, "Take me straight to Gjakova." Sabri had a friend in Gjakova, Mark Murturi. Fuat left him there and came back home. And then Mark that night, together with his wife, she's from Vuthaj, took him to Montenegro, he

¹⁹ Car manufacturer located in Kragujevac, Serbia, made Fiat-based cars for the Eastern European market. The company became a subsidiary of Fiat Chrysler Automobiles in 2014.

crossed the border on foot. It was December 22, the Day of the JNA,²⁰ of Yugoslavia. They were counting on the possibility of people celebrating it. And he crossed the border on foot.

He said, "It was muddy and rainy." He [then] crossed to Albania. We went back, and the next day I took my son and went home to my mother. It was terrible, what would happen was in the hands of God, what would happen. Our entire house was checked, the police would come and look for him at home, they wouldn't find him. We had no idea what happened, where he went, or what he did. I once went to the prison, just in case, I said, "My brother is imprisoned, could I please [see him]?" He said, "Yes, we do have a Sabri." Trust me, on one side I wanted him to be there, on the other my knees felt weak because I knew he said, "I will kill myself." When the guard came back, he said, "No, it's not Sabri Novosella, it's Sabri Staracella," a different last name.

So, for about two months we were out of our minds, wanting to know what happened. After two months, Sabri had gone to Turkey. They [*Illegale*] had their own reason, since Isuf was in Germany, they needed to send someone to Turkey. He [Sabri] said, "On a ship, it took me two months, a ship that transports goods," they made him a passport under a different name and he arrived in Turkey. In Turkey, we had a, my brother's wife had a sister there, and that's where he went. He told her to write a letter and send it to her sister in Pristina. And amongst other things, she wrote, "How are you," and, "how is Ilir doing, is his ear hurting?" Ilir was our brother's son, the oldest, and, "Is Alban playing with pigeons, is he..." and those are things only Sabri knows. And at that moment we found out that Sabri was alive.

Anita Susuri: So he wrote a sort of code?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Yes, he wrote it because we knew that woman didn't know Ilir, nor Alban, Ilir was the older son, Alban was the younger one.

Anita Susuri: How long after was it safe for him to contact you, after that, on the phone or...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Well, two or three months after, two or three months after that. And then, I kept in touch with him the whole time. From work, from the director's office, since I was thinking that one isn't bugged, we didn't dare to from anywhere else. At our homes, the phone was bugged the entire time, at my home as well, and... But I was thinking it wasn't bugged at work because nobody would think of that, so I talked to him and told him what was happening. And then I went to visit Sabri with a different passport. After two or three years of not seeing him, I went mad, [I was thinking] how could I see him, and I had headaches for months. I said, "Fadil, I don't know what to do, I want to go" {sighs}.

²⁰ The Yugoslav People's Army Day was established by the order of Josip Broz Tito on October 20, 1947. Celebrated on December 22, commemorating the People's Liberation Army formed in 1941. On that day all units and organizations within the Yugoslav People's Army including other Yugoslavia state bodies celebrated the day. Prestigious awards were given on that day to anyone who had contributed to the defense of Yugoslavia in some way including military, scientific, economic or other contributions.

My physician told me to have a CT [scan]. There were no CT [scanners] here at the time, only in Belgrade or Zagreb. I always kept it to myself that I wanted to leave and go to Sweden (laughs) and I was thinking about where to find a passport, none of my family members had one. The government back then had taken them from us. My sisters and I were married and although we had different last names, they didn't let us [take the passports]. So at that time, I went to visit my brother-in-law's daughter and told her, "I am very sick, I have headaches, I want to have a CT scan in Zagreb." If I wouldn't be able to make an appointment there, if I had my passport I could go to Germany, we had a friend there. She said, "I will give you my passport," she said, "I won't tell," [she meant] her husband. And I don't know, we never discussed what it was like or how he found out. I took her passport.

We went to Zagreb, and I had a CT scan. They told me, "Your brain is exhausted more than it should at your age." They gave me some medicine and then we went to Germany, from Germany I told Sabri that I wanted to go to Sweden. Sabri was all alone at the time, he had nobody from the family there. Anyone from our family going there with no passport was difficult. So then, I went to Sweden, I found Sabri alone at an apartment. He was expecting us... we had to go there by ship, Germany, Denmark, and then take a ship to Sweden from Denmark. Then we got into a car, and Sabri was expecting us at the border. We went there. And I didn't dare to go out there, "Don't get out [of the car] with someone else's passport where there are people, you'll make it worse for him."

I had told my brother-in-law's daughter, "If anything happens, if they catch me, nothing will happen to you. I will tell them I came to visit you and stole your passport, that you're not aware I have taken it." Because it was a responsibility for her too. I said, "Don't worry, I will tell them that I stole your passport. You know nothing and the responsibility is mine." So, I stayed there for three or four days. Sabri told me the list of the people who gave money for Kosovo, it was... I read it, Sabri was first, he had given 15 thousand *marka*,²¹ we had *marka* back then. When I went to the door, I saw some big shoes. I said, "Who do these shoes belong to?" [He said] "Me." "Well brother, aren't they [too] big?" He said, "They are, but I found them cheap." So, he gave 15 thousand *marka* for Kosovo and didn't buy a pair of shoes for himself. And I felt really sorry when I left him all alone. He prepared food for us. No wife, no children, no nothing. And I decided, I will do whatever I can to take his wife there and... I will take his wife there. And that's what happened after.

Part Three

Anita Susuri: How did you continue your activity in *illegale* during those years?

²¹ Albanian: *Marka*; German: *Deutsche Mark* was the basic monetary unit of West Germany from 1948 to 1990 and of reunited Germany from 1990 to 2001. It was used as a stable, non-official currency in various Yugoslav republics as a result of hyper-inflation of the *dinar*.

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: I stopped it, with Sabri leaving, I didn't have any contacts and I didn't know anything.

Anita Susuri: That's when you stopped it?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Yes, the last line was, "Sabri left Kosovo" that line, and I had no more connection whatsoever.

Anita Susuri: What year was it when...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: It was '79, the end of '79.

Anita Susuri: And then there were the '81 demonstrations.

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Yes, then there were the '81 demonstrations. After the '81 demonstrations... They beat Selatin up during the '81 demonstrations, and he was caught on the street. None of them were in prison [at the time]. After the '81 demonstrations, they imprisoned Ilir, Ilir is my brother's son, he was a minor. In the meantime, Fadil took Sabri's wife and two of the children to him. The older children stayed at home, he [Fadil] took them. And you know how [they got] someone else's passport for Safet, Safet is my brother's wife. [For] The children, the passports of my two sons. And then, they gave us [passports] after '75, they allowed us to have passports. Kosovo had a little bit of autonomy and they allowed us after '75. Not after '75. After '80. Because Sabri left Kosovo in '79, and at the time I didn't have a passport, I went [to see him] with someone else's passport. So, after '79, after... yes, after '80, after '80.

At the time, Fadil took Sabri's wife and their son [to Sweden], they took one of their own passports, and the other was my son's. He took Safet to Sabri in Sweden. And then he took two of his daughters, they had someone else's passport as well. Fadil always put himself and his job at risk, he was editor-in-chief of the newspaper, so he had a high job position. But, he could see...

Anita Susuri: What newspaper was he an editor-in-chief for?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Until they fired us, they fired him when they fired all of us.

Anita Susuri: For which newspaper?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Excuse me?

Anita Susuri: For which newspaper?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: The newspaper Tribuna, they had an internal newspaper back then, Tribuna, he was the editor in chief.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to ask you about the passports, how did... how did you manage [to travel] with someone else's passports? I think there were photos in the passport back then, did you change the photo?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: There were photos, but they didn't really check them. Because they knew [assumed] nobody... nobody would dare. On top of it, [on] the passport, the photo was similar, the age was similar, you know. And they didn't, they didn't really check it that much. He [Fadil] took all his kids, and his older ones remained at home. Fadil took Ilir to Sabri after twelve years. He was small when he left him, he was growing up, and then he got married, had a wife and two children.

Anita Susuri: At the time he went?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: At the time he went, yes, when he [Ilir] went to see his parents in Sweden. This time around Ilir had taken the passport of his sister's wife, Nazmi. And the passport said he had two children. His sister had two sons, while he had a son and daughter. But, they weren't suspicious, they didn't assume someone would dare do something like that (laughs). I remember Lirjan like today. Fadil told us, he said, "As soon as we crossed the border," the name on the passport was Krenar, Krenar was his cousin, and Fadil said, "As soon as we crossed the border, [he'd ask] 'Uncle Fadil who am I now?'" You know, "Who am I now?" He said, "I took Ilir to him, when Sabri got out to greet them, he was a married man with two children, and he left him when he was little.

Anita Susuri: Did your other brothers and sisters have problems? I'm sure they did, with the police and guards...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: They did have [problems], all of them were imprisoned, each one of them. But, fortunately, at work, they didn't... they didn't bother us. My sister finished school for medicine after me, she got a job at the hospital. My younger sister, who finished technical school, worked at Dardania. My brother finished the Faculty of Economics and initially got a job at the Economics School. And then he became a commercial director at the Tile Factory. He was also doing fine, he took care of all of us, both the sisters and brothers, everyone. My younger brother, since he was working, so they didn't bother the rest of the family that much.

Anita Susuri: For how long did the persecution of your brother go on, from the year...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Always, until Kosovo's liberation, until the end. Until, until after... also during the isolation. After, I mean, my brother Bedri was confined with 350 Kosovo intellectuals, they were all imprisoned on the same day. It was terrible.

[The interview was interrupted here]

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: So in '89, when Kosovo's autonomy was revoked, when everything was taken from Kosovo, that's when 350 Kosovo intellectuals were imprisoned. They were all directors of organizations, professors, doctors. Among others, Bedri was imprisoned too. We were surprised. Donika said, she was small back then, she said, "Father said goodbye to us, he hugged us and said, 'Don't worry about me, they are... they will ask me something.'" He thought he would be questioned, Bedri thought they would imprison Selatin. They had surrounded the house and most of them were Albanian. When she [my mother] got out, she said, "They have taken Bedri." And I remember like it was today, I don't know for which imprisonment, Ibush Kllokoqi, my mother grabbed him and said, "Let me grab hold of my son while he's leaving," he was handcuffed. She said, "He pushed me, 'Go away, you're not my mother.'" When she went out, she said, "They have taken Bedri." We were surprised, how did they take Bedri, he was imprisoned less [frequently], the others, Selatin...

And then we found out that night, they broke the news that 350 Kosovo intellectuals were imprisoned, Bedri was among them. *Kuuuh!* {onomatopoeia} He wasn't doing well at the time because of sciatica. I immediately went there with a stack of medication in a bag, I went to the prison door, "Please, only so I can give him the medication, I don't want to see him," I only wanted to know if he was there or not. "No," they said, "they are not here." [I asked] "What?" They said, "They were sent to Leskovac." *Kuku*,²² we went out of our minds! What would we do then? "Fadil, we'll go to Leskovac." We couldn't dare let Selatin go, Sabria was abroad, who would go? I said, "Fadil, you and I." Xheva, Bedri's wife, and Magbule, my sister, were behind me, they came with me. As soon as we arrived at Llap's Mosque, Fadil stopped the car, he said, "Igballe, you stay." He said, "Something might happen to us," it was '89, it was terrible, "you stay because if something happens to us, our children will be left without both of us." "I won't stay," I said, "never, I want to see Bedri."

It was terrible, we went to the prison... we knocked on the door. "They're not here," I said, "by accident." "How are they not here?" [He said] "No, they're in Pristina." He lied to us, they were being tortured because when we saw our brother later, after a month, he had lost weight, he had become... "What happened?" "No big deal," he said, "thankfully they imprisoned me because *bac* [referring to his brother] wouldn't be able to handle the tortures." He was healthier and a little younger. He said, "No big deal, thankfully they imprisoned me because *bac* wouldn't be able to handle the tortures." We came back from Leskovac, and one of them said, "Quickly go back, how did you dare, can't you see how terrible it is, go back home." We went back home, Bedri was in prison for two months. He got released, he had lost weight, he was tortured a lot. But they received a decision, it was from outside, someone intervened and they were released from prison.

Anita Susuri: What were the '90s like after, I think you were still working...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Yes, yes I was working in '90. In '91 I gave birth to another son. I decided I wanted to have a girl, I had three sons, my youngest and Taulant. I was on maternity leave when the ethnic cleansing began, when people were getting fired. When they took the stance of firing people. I

²² Colloquial, expresses disbelief, distress, or wonder, depending on the context.

was on maternity leave. They had initially fired the directors, the leaders, but they fired me too. I was an assistant in the administration department. [Kaqusha Jashari](#) was a director with us back then. I was on maternity leave. It was six months off and six months working part time. I decided to take the part time option because it was more convenient. My husband was unemployed at the time, he would stay with the baby, and I went to work.

When I went to work, they said, “You were fired.” “Nope,” I said, “I didn’t receive a decision.” They had issued the decisions. The new director that had come, supposedly a good man, didn’t issue any more decisions [to fire people], but with the ones already taken, he didn’t let anyone work. We had a sort of list that we signed when we started working. He said, Latif Krasniqi, he was an assistant for communication, he said, “Igballe, you can’t sign it.” “What? Give me the list *more*, who is asking you?” I signed it. Of course, he told the directors, he said, “She is not listening to me.” He said, “Tell her to come to sign here”

But I used to not go alone, three or four colleagues would go together. I took the list and signed it and... he said, “You are fired.” “If you give me the decision, I am fired, otherwise, I am working. I was on maternity leave.” Because they were saying I was fired before I took my maternity leave. I would have to return all the money I got [during the leave] and I said, “I don’t want to quit the job. You are saying that we are willingly quitting our jobs, but I don’t want to,” you know. I said, “Don’t you forget it, I have five brothers-in-law,” since my husband has five brothers (laughs), “and four brothers and four sons.” I said, “Don’t you forget it,” pointing my finger like this, {points index finger}. He said, “*Ti mi pretiš*” [Srb.: You are threatening me]. I said, “No, I am not threatening you, I’m just being honest.”

When I went to the office, I saw that my seat was taken, they brought someone else and they wouldn't leave. They wouldn't leave. As soon as she got you in the morning, I would take my seat, where I always was (laughs). And they came two or three times, the director said to me, “You have to leave, you know, it’s bad, the police could come to take you.” No, actually he called me to his office first. He said, “We’ll give you your salary for three years [at once].” There are some friends of mine who took it. There are some friends of mine who took it for three years. I said, “I don’t want to sell my job position. You are saying that Albanians are willingly quitting their jobs. I want to work and I won’t sell my job position for money.” “But the police will come to take you.” I said, “No problem, let them come take me.”

The next morning police came to the door, they took me in their car and sent me straight to the police station. “And don’t you dare go back again.” I got dressed and went there the next morning again. The police took me [to the station] 15 times. And the newspaper wrote about it, but I can’t... I strangely can’t find those articles. I don’t know, once *Bujku*, back then it was *Bujku* instead of *Rilindja* and... I couldn’t find those articles. And the police came to take me again the next morning. They called me and threatened me at the director’s office. They said, “You have to...” “Why *bre* should I leave my job? I don’t want to, I don’t want to sell my job position.” And I pointed to the director like this {points index finger} I said, “Look,” there were two cops, I said, “he wants to leave my four children with no food,

hopefully, God leaves his own with no hands and legs.” They took me to the police car, and to the station again (laughs).

They removed me from there again the next day, “Don’t go!” I used to say, “I have no choice but to come. Show me the decision that you are firing me, and I will leave. I was on maternity leave and I have no choice but to work now. I have to come back,” I said, “if I leave, I will have to return the money I got on maternity leave.” It was actually like that since they had written the decision before I got my maternity leave. Many times, once at the stairs. After that, they had taken the decision to guard the door, to not let me in at all. I said... [They said] “You can’t go in!” [I said] “I have low blood pressure,” I said, “if I don’t go in to get a coffee, I will pass out” (laughs). And I called the person working at the cafeteria, “Please,” I said, “bring me a coffee.” They gave it to me through the window. And two cops were watching me, I was drinking my coffee, (laughs) I drank my coffee.

And then the director came out, not the general director, but the technical director, *shka*.²³ “*Šta čekate, udrite*” [Srb.: What are you waiting for, hit her], “hit her.” I opened up my jacket {opens up blazer}, I said, “Hit me, what are you waiting for?” One of them said, “*Nikad na ženske nisam udarao*,” you know, “I never hit women.” And many times, I used to go to the office, they would call me. There was a Serbian woman I had helped when she got hired, she was a typist. We had to hire one and connection after connection. I was a Senior member, so we hired her.

As soon as she saw me, she used to call the police. “How could you,” I said, “not feel sorry, are you aware that I brought you here?” “*Eh, došlo je moje vreme sad, e...*” [Srb.: Eh, my time has come now...] and she always used to call me, “*Moja Igbala, moja Ihbala. E do...*” [Srb.: My Igballe, my Igballe] so, “My time has come now and I have to call the cops on you.” Until one day I told the Serbian woman who had taken my place, I said, “I have nothing to do, you have taken my place. But I know who you are, I know where your house is, I know who’s your husband, I know the room you sleep in, I know how many children you have.” I actually didn’t know anything, I didn’t know any of it (laughs) only out of spite so I would fright her.

Another time they took me to the station again... it was actually where the jail is. And one of them told me, “Are you aware that we can arrest you?” I said, “No problem, arrest me. I will at least get free food” (laughs). “You’re leaving my children with no food. At least if I get to prison, I will eat for free.” Until the end, after that discussion, I went to work the next morning again. My colleagues would be really terrified, they were scared because they weren’t used to seeing cops like that, but I was raised going to police stations and it didn’t freak me out. I wasn’t scared that I got in the police car and they took me to the station alone.

The last time they took me to the station, I don’t know which station it was, near the school, the fourth station is at the park I think, further from Veli Deva’s²⁴ house, there is a police station there. It still is a

²³ *Shka* (m.); *shkinë* (f.), plural *shkijet*, is a derogatory term in Albanian used for Serbs.

²⁴ Veli Deva (1924-2015) was a senior communist leader in Kosovo under the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

police station. “What is the problem?” Since they would constantly bring me in. I said, “You know what? I don’t know how, but I am only asking to see the decision that they are firing me from work. Imagine,” I said, “just like you are at your job now, someone will come and take you out by the arm, how would you react?” “I have four children, my husband is unemployed, they are leaving me with no, with no...” “You know what,” they said, “I can’t do anything else but nobody from this station will come to take you again.” And it was true, nobody came to get me again.

And then I went there for six months, with no salary, no nothing, arguing, being despised. But I had decided not to leave because they would say, “You are willingly quitting your jobs.” And lastly I filed a complaint at the Ministry of Roads, which was the Directorate of Roads of Kosovo, but later on when Serbia took all the competencies, it was Belgrade’s, I filed many complaints and I won, they compensated me for those months. And at the end they fired all of us, it wasn’t long before they fired all of us.

Anita Susuri: They fired you in ‘91, right?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Excuse me?

Anita Susuri: They fired you in ‘91?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Yes, yes, yes in ‘91. They fired all of us in ‘91.

Anita Susuri: And then your husband wasn’t working either, or...?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Excuse me?

Anita Susuri: Both your husband and you were unemployed?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: No, my husband was fired earlier. I say it was a difficult situation financially, we had four small children. We tried to do some kind of business, to sometimes go to Turkey and buy something, like most Albanians of Kosovo that were in that situation at the time.

Anita Susuri: The parallel system²⁵ began during those years as well...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Yes, yes, yes...

²⁵ During the 1990s, at the height of Milošević’s repression, Kosovo Albanians were expelled from all state institutions and services. The parallel system refers to the Kosovo Albanian society, living side by side with the Serbian state, during the 1990s.

Anita Susuri: The parties were founded, LDK²⁶ and...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: LDK was founded and Selatin immediately became a party member and he would give me a lot of paperwork. I was the first to go around the neighborhood with a notebook under my arm since I thought to myself I am a woman and they wouldn't notice. I went to Bajram Kelmendi²⁷ and told them to sign to become members [of the party]. Everyone, in order, at work and wherever I was, since at the time there was only... only the Democratic League. And I made everyone sign, and I would send a bundle of signatures to the association, at LDK's office where it still is now. So, I tried in every way, in every... to do something about Kosovo, at the time and later and always.

Anita Susuri: What were the '90s like for you? Did you take part in those women's activities that took place...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Everywhere, everywhere, I was first. Wherever there was an activity, I was there. At the demonstrations and protests, I always took the hot water they would throw at us in the street at the demonstrations. We had a loaf of bread under our arms many times, we got on our way to Mitrovica to the Iber bridge, I went there by foot from Pristina. Although I was a mother, although I had children and...

Anita Susuri: Do you remember those demonstrations in more detail, for example, the women's, the ones with the bread or keys, or white papers?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: With the keys, with everything. With the keys and the bread and noise-making and at home in the evening and every place where something happened, I was among all the women of Kosovo. So, all of us tried in our own way to oppose the enemy. For some time, and then the war happened, I was working at the Red Cross, at Kosovo's Red Cross. I gathered clothes around our neighborhood, blankets, and stuff and we sent them to the Red Cross. It was Kosovo's Red Cross, not at the cross, a small office, behind Kosovo's Museum.

And I met everyone there, I met the doctor who died, who stepped on mines, Shpëtim Rrobaj. I worked with Jusuf Dedushaj there, we distributed clothes, we distributed clothes. Because the war in Drenica broke out. They were left homeless. We started getting help from outside. We distributed aid from there, I worked the whole time for two or three months until the war broke out. And that day when it became terrible, I still went. I went to work, and somebody said, "Run, go home! There is no job anymore, there's nothing!" Until after when the bombings began.

²⁶ Alb. *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* - Democratic League of Kosovo. The first political party of Kosovo, was founded in 1989, when the autonomy of Kosovo was revoked, by a group of journalists and intellectuals. The LDK quickly became a party-state, gathering all Albanians, and remained the only party until 1999.

²⁷ 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.

Anita Susuri: I want to hear from you about what the '90s were like, what the atmosphere was like. Was it felt in the city, since for example in Drenica and these war zones it was much more...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: To be honest with you, not until late. It concerned me a lot, until late we couldn't hear anything, Pristina's restaurants were full. The war in Drenica was happening, I was working at the Red Cross all day. I was in contact with these people. Women with small children would come, "I left everything I had," and now they would ask for a liter of milk for their child. While in downtown Pristina, it was as if nothing happened. It's true and I remember that really well. Until it affected everyone, then...

Anita Susuri: Do you remember the day, actually it was night, when the bombings began?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Of course. Since we, my brothers left their houses. I called them and I said, "Come back to your houses." My brother was abroad, we hadn't seen Sabri yet, he was in Alba... in Turk... in Sweden with his family. And then, he went to Albania from Sweden. In Albania, he began constructing and we were in contact over the phone. Somebody went straight to him the night of the bombings, Bedri and his children, my youngest brother. Seltin had gone. We didn't have passports, we had no way to run or go abroad. And I used to say, "I won't leave Kosovo, I won't ever leave Kosovo. They are only lying."

We bought food and stuff and we stored it in case something would happen, we would stay home. The night of the bombings, Kushtrim... they stayed in the balcony all night, [he] and Bedri and they got out. The police [station] here was bombed. "[Paternal] Uncle, look! You will never have to witness what you did again." It was a big joy for us. My brother's son would tell us from Albania, "It [airplane] took off" Because apparently the bombings would be seen from there beforehand. "Wait for this many [airplanes] because they're on their way." It was a great joy for all Albanians, we were waiting for our saviors.

I had spoken to my brother earlier. I would talk to Sabri when I went to visit him with a different passport, "What will I do when Kosovo is liberated *bre*, tell me is there any chance for it to be liberated?" [He said] "You know what, when you hear the German tanks in Kosovo, that's when Kosovo will be liberated." [I asked] "What would happen to the Serbs?" "The Serbs? You will feel sorry for them and you will cry." "Nope," I said, "I will never cry, maybe I will feel sorry [though]" (laughs). I said, "Maybe I will feel sorry," which is true because later I felt sorry. When the war was over, I felt sorry for one woman. When we came back she said, "Will you buy me a loaf of bread?" Believe me, I felt sorry for her. And I remembered my brother's words, I said, "I will not cry, but I do feel sorry." She didn't dare to go outside, "Will you buy me a loaf of bread?"

So, it was a great joy for all Albanians when Serbia was bombed. And I decided not to leave my house and I didn't go out and I stayed home. My youngest brother Bedri went out in the morning. He took his children in his car and went. I said, "Take my son, one of them." Jashar, my second, was really scared. He said, "Don't ask me that sister, all my children are grown. Something might happen to them, I can

do nothing, I can't take yours! Something might happen to your child [under my watch] too." So, we remained at home with all the children. "Come back," I used to say, "to your houses." He was killed...

Anita Susuri: Bajram Kelmendi.

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Bajram Kelmendi, and my family attended his funeral. The boys with seven or eight other people went and buried him. We were in Dragodan and were closer. And when the funeral was over, I said, "Stay!" The entire city was terrified, it was problematic to even buy bread. The police, the *magjup*²⁸ of the *mahalla*²⁹ would deliver the bread. Eid,³⁰ for Eid's lunch, I had guests over. There were twenty people in my house. And crowds of people were passing by, from below, from the street, [I would tell them] "Go back!" They said, "You'll see when they put a gun in your mouth, you'll see how you'll go back."

The shots were heard at our house, they almost hit Kushtrim, my oldest son. He had attempted to join the war a few times. He was very late one night, I got really worried, I almost went out of my mind. He said, "They told us, 'We don't have guns, we have no food to give you. Stay ready, if anything happens, we will let you know.'" And we were forced to leave the house, to leave with the children, it was two or three cars. "I don't want to leave Kosovo, I don't want to go abroad, from there."

Anita Susuri: Did the police or military force you out, or did you leave by yourself?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: We were forced out by the police, the military, that's why I'm saying we heard gunshots. I yelled at them "Go back!" They would come in our direction from the end of Dragodan. And there were women and children, "Go back!" I used to ask them where they were going. A crowd of women told me, "You'll see when they come." And they were coming, in our direction. And then we heard the gunshots towards our house. At that point, everyone joined the crowd and I said, "Where? Let's go to my brothers." But no way, it was terrible there at Dodona. We went to a neighbor's house. We heard the gunshots, they were probably killing people. None of my family members were there. They escaped however they could. From there, we went to one of my brother-in-law's houses.

Anita Susuri: In Pristina, right?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: In Pristina, we went to three or four different places, since my brothers-in-law are in Pristina, three different houses. We went to Bregu i Diellit [neighborhood], at his [house], and from there, they... we slept over there, the children of my other brother-in-law joined, we became too many family members. Imagine, the next day someone left a letter at the door. "Go away,"

²⁸ *Magjup* is a racial slur. The term usually denotes racial inferiority, uneducation and "backwardness" and is used by many cultures in the Balkans against members of the Romani community. In this case, the speaker is referring to the neighborhoods that were populated mostly by people of the Romani community.

²⁹ Word of Arabic origin that means neighborhood.

³⁰ *Bajram* is the Turkish word for festival. Albanians celebrate *Ramadan Bajram*, which is the same as *Eid*, and *Kurban Bajram*, which is the Day of Sacrifice, two months and ten days after *Ramadan Bajram*. On the day of Eid, there is no fasting. In 1999 it fell on 28 March, four days after the beginning of NATO bombing.

it read, “or we will send you away.” “We won’t leave,” we used to say, “we don’t want to go.” But then we went to my other brother-in-law and that night was terrible. The police surrounded us while we were inside, and Kushtrim and my brother-in-law’s son, they had a revolver and said, “We want to, we will shoot.”

I heard them coming, the police entered the house, and I put the back of the door because I didn’t want to let them come in. Someone said, “They’re here.” “They’re not, the children went that way.” They went out through the window, from the first floor, they jumped out of the window, Kushtrim, together with my brother-in-law’s son. My brother-in-law’s son was a little rounder and got hurt. He ran from behind the house, we heard the gunshots, someone ran away. It was terrible, I was really scared. They ran away, while we were waiting at the door. “Run away!” They took Fadil’s car. They barely gave it back, I was really scared, Kushtrim wasn’t there. We were searching for him on the other side, we went to the other side, until our neighbors pointed at us, “Run away!”

We went to my brother-in-law, a different one this time, at Bregu i Diellit, and he has an apartment, so we went to his apartment. We were scared. I went back once more round and round, thinking what could have happened to him, if he was killed somewhere. Luckily for him, it [the road] was blocked, a car was burned down and they couldn’t pass there, they went back on the other side. We went back to the house, they started to tell me, “Don’t be sad.” I went mad, “How can you tell me ‘don’t be sad?’” And then a little later I saw Kushtrim coming from down the road. The neighbors across from us had opened their door for him, they kept him in until the situation calmed down. He had worn a pair of their shoes, since he left the house barefoot, he didn’t have anything to wear. And they [family members] yelled from the window, he gestured to them, “Hush!” {pretends she’s zipping her mouth} from down the road because someone could hear. It was a great joy when he entered the door. And to think that he would get sick after (cries). And we decided to leave too. There’s nothing left, we have nothing to wait for, we decided to leave too.

Part Four

Anita Susuri: While you were moving around Pristina, what condition was Pristina in at the time?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: It was in terrible condition. Fadil and I went to get groceries twice because we stayed at my brother-in-law’s house for a few days. We went to Dragodan to get groceries because they reserved it for us, I used to say, “I won’t leave my house, we will stay at home.” I remember once, it was the two of us, at the Student’s Dorm. We walked through it, and we were both surrounded. “*Stoj!* [Srb.: Stop] Where are you going?” They put us against the wall {raises her arms as if she’s against the wall}. “Where are you going?” [We replied] “We are going home.” They checked our pockets. Fortunately, they [only] found two or three hundred *marka* in Fadil’s pocket, we were trying to set some aside to take it with us because we didn’t know what would happen to us.

They... they kicked us. One of them shouted, “*Udrite, šta čekate!*” [Srb.: Hit them, don’t wait!] and I, I was prepared, they would shoot their guns, it was both of us. Because the others didn’t dare leave the house (laughs). But we survived that too. We came to... Dragodan, Arbëria, it was a military zone, it was surrounded by a red stripe all around since they settled there. One person told us, “I will let you through, but the ones up there won’t.” I said, “We are trying to go home,” and when we went home, we filled a bag with meat and stuff to eat. There were a lot of us at our brother-in-law’s house and we didn’t have anything to eat. The whole city was a horror, on all sides... and it was like that.

Anita Susuri: You stayed in Pristina the whole time, you...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: No, we left. We left for only a bit, and then we stayed. Maybe it was the end of April, I’m not sure, we left for 30 days I think. We left, imagine, after we left once, we were in car lines. And they told us, “No, the agreement was reached, go back!” We stayed at the border for four days, in Bllacë,³¹ at the border in Sharr’s direction, no in Kaçanik’s direction, in Elez Han’s direction. We stayed there for four days, we were freezing, at some point we lit up a fire to stay warm, we would eat the food they gave us. They brought us help, food, so we could at least keep our children fed. I only didn’t have Jashar with me, my sister took him when she left abroad. Since he was really scared, my sister took him. I didn’t know, I don’t for how long I didn’t know anything about what happened to him.

And imagine, people in their right mind, came and told us, “The agreement was reached, go back, what are you waiting for, nobody will bother you anymore.” Some cars went back, “Will we go back?” “Let’s go back.” On our way back, when we arrived in Veternik, on that side, there were many bearded men, they would point their big knives at us. “*Kuku*, where are we going?” {puts her hands together}. We went back again and stayed for four or five days, we went back and forth again. We came to Dragodan. In Dragodan, in front of our front door, there was a car with an open door, a dead man was inside it. We were horrified, terrible. And we went back, we went to a different brother-in-law’s house. We stayed there for two or three more days.

Now we were thinking about how to find a way to leave. At some point there were buses. And I think we left our car there and took a bus. We left the car, we got on the bus. They would transport people. And they stopped us at the border, they [border patrol] got in the bus, before the border, they got in the bus and chose the boys [to take with them]. I was horrified, my son was grown at the time. I don’t know how old Kushtrim was, he was born in ‘77, maybe, twenty years old, yes. And I picked up my brother-in-law’s small daughter, “Lie down, so they don’t notice you. Put the girl on your lap so they don’t see your face,” since they would pick [the boys].

They beat them up outside the bus, we could hear the noise. We were horrified! They got us all off the bus. “Where are you going?” “We’re going to Macedonia.” “Why?” I said, “Because we’re scared of the

³¹ Bllacë is the border crossing between Kosovo and Macedonia where thousands of refugees were stuck for a few days in March 1999, at the beginning of the NATO intervention, unable to either move into Macedonia or re-enter Kosovo.

bombings,” I was thinking to myself, we’re actually scared of you, but... “We’re scared of the bombings.” And we crossed the border. And now we had to wait at the border, it was so terrible and chaotic... You know how it went down there, they would register the number of people, like they were giving out animals. “Five men left, five women, four women, four kids,” that’s how it was.

[The interview was interrupted here]

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: “*Begaj, begaj*” [Srb.: Run away, run away], it was Kushtrim, he was tall. And one of them got near him with a baton to hit him, “Why are you pushing?” I yelled. He grabbed his baton from their hands, they were about to beat him up real bad if I didn’t get in between. “Go away,” I yelled, and then the others yelled, “Go away,” I said, “didn’t they beat us up enough over there, and now you want to do it here as well.” It was a big chaos, it was terrible, but he got away with it. We crossed it [the border], [we were] on the bus all night. And they sent us to Čegrane. They sent us to Čegrane, and they settled in camps. But our brother had gone there earlier, Selatin, and I also found my son there, Jashar, when I went.

We stayed at a house that some Albanians from Macedonia left us. They welcomed us like family, all of us in their houses. But they couldn’t give us food because they didn’t have enough for themselves, so we had to go wait for food. It was terrible to go gather aid, and ask for food. We got used to it at some point (laughs), we got used to it at some point, we would go out to get it. And my third son was in England. We were both left unemployed, the children had grown up, four children, how would we provide for them? People would pay to send their family members abroad. And we were thinking about which one to send, I would think, if I send my two oldest, they wouldn’t come back. The one who was 16 was more... to take care of himself, more...

Anita Susuri: Street smart?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: More street smart. I would think, if he went he would come back at some point. And... when I prepared him and sent my 16-year-old son away, he was an excellent student, but in his third year of high school, he had to leave school. It was terrible. He went there, my brother-in-law’s son welcomed him and he immediately found a job. And he immediately started to send us money. He sent 500 *marka* to Čegrane. It was sad to see him spend his money but... (laughs). And we came back to Kosovo probably with the first bus that returned.

Anita Susuri: How did you receive the news that Kosovo was liberated?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Well the whole time, we had nothing else to do but listen to the news on the radio however we could. And we were happy, it was a great joy that I can’t describe. My brother returned from Albania as well, the one we didn’t see for years, he came back too. Only him, not his family, only he came back and we got back together. We came back on buses, and the ones that told us, “We’ll cut you with knives,” were preparing their tractors. Now they were running away and we were going back to our homes.

When we came back, we went straight home. Our brother Sabri also came back, and he wasn't in Kosovo for twenty years. My sister never left, my sister Magbule who was a nurse, and her three sons. We were really worried about her, her luck, at home... she had many Serbs in her neighborhood. And she stayed inside her house the whole time. We were really scared, but nobody bothered her. She had prepared lunch and was waiting for us. Some of us came by bus, some by car. My brother said, "I don't want to go in the house at all, I want to go to the graveyard," because our father and mother died, they died, he hadn't seen any of them. We went straight to the graveyard. My mother is mother Naile, he named the spa Nana Naile [Mother Naile]. He named it after our mother.

Anita Susuri: Your mother?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Yes, yes, I am mother Naile's daughter.

Anita Susuri: Oh is that so? I didn't know.

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: I am mother Naile's daughter.

Anita Susuri: Ah, that's good.

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: And we went to the graveyard, the grass had grown over them this high {puts her hand over her chest}, we could barely find the graves of our parents. And then we went back to our sister and ate lunch.

Anita Susuri: In what state did you find your house, [and] Pristina?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: To be honest, Pristina wasn't as damaged as it could've been. It wasn't burnt, only two houses were burnt in Arbëria. They apparently saved it for themselves, they thought they would come back because if they knew they would lose it, they would never leave Pristina in that state. There wasn't great damage. There was stealing, valuable possessions people had [got stolen]. But, they had broken into our houses, they had taken some valuable possessions. I had stored some of my gold in the attic, since I had a lot of gold. I hid it somewhere, I thought, if my house gets burned, let the gold burn too. Nothing happened to it. [But] It was a mess, it was terrible we couldn't enter the front yard, the grass had grown so high.

We came back, we cleaned ourselves up, we were happy. I would say, "God didn't punish us," since we didn't get damaged, we all went back to our houses. Sabri, who hadn't been back in many years came back as well. During that summer I would feel sorry for people because they would say, "This many are killed here, this many are killed there." I would say, "God protected us." But, the terror came for me later. By the end of one year, Kushtrim got sick (cries).

[The interview was interrupted here]

Anita Susuri: After the war, how did your life go on?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: After the war, we came back, we all came back alive, and that's important, nobody was killed. Although we had suffered, some more, some less. But we all came back, our more distant family as well, our [paternal] uncles and [maternal] uncles and our family, we came back and... In the village, they had their houses burned, because my brother had houses [there]. My father had his property, they had houses there, they were all burned. While in the city, in Pristina, Pristina was not so damaged. They surely saved it for themselves, Pristina was less damaged.

Our house wasn't damaged, they had broken some things, they had turned things upside down. They took some valuable possessions, but the house was generally in good shape. The children came back alright, they had grown up, they began finding jobs. Kushtrim got into the Red Cross. Jashar immediately started working for OSCE, they knew English really well. They invited me back to my job. It was a great joy to go back to work after so many years. Two engineers came to my house and invited me back. I don't remember for how long we worked [with no salary], we took things from home, some took tea, some coffee, to drink it, because we didn't have salaries or anything. But it was that great desire and joy.

We went back to work, we rented our house to the American Office. They asked to rent it, and we fixed it up and immediately rented it out. Fadil didn't want to at all, but until Kushtrim got sick and... he was healthy, who would've thought that he would get a really bad disease. Bashkim came back from England, he stayed there for a while and I didn't see him for two years. He was 16 [when he left] and when he came back he had grown 20 centimeters. All our family got back together. It was a great joy. Believe me, I felt so sorry the entire summer, I used to cry for the people that were announced dead, poor mothers were left without their children.

In the meantime, Kushtrim said, "I'm sick." [I replied] "Why *bre*?" "My stomach is hurting." "How is your stomach hurting?" "Go to the hospital," I said, "go to the hospital *more*." I just remembered I forgot to take the first picture I had of Kushtrim and me at the hospital. He was kept there, and it's the most unfortunate thing about our medical system that a person gets worse until a diagnosis is found. He was in hospitals, moving around for about two months. Plead to someone, call someone else, "Please, please check him." Many of his friends brought their passports, "Go abroad with our passports." And that's what happened, he took one of his friends' passports. Fadil attempted to extend his passport, but someone apparently made him a fake one, and they took his passport altogether.

It was only Kushtrim and I. And through Tirana, Sabri who had been in Albania came along. We went to Istanbul. His disease was discovered there. It was terrible (cries). And yes, even he who has that strong, that... we stayed there for a while, he got chemotherapy. We came back to Pristina. It was a horrible battle. Kushtrim had a girlfriend who he was dating, and she never got married, she never got married for 20 years now. He stayed close to him until the last moment. We tried to do everything, but in the

end, nothing worked. On January 16, 2002, Kushtrim died (cries). My world turned upside down. But, I still tried to push through, with my whole chest, I don't want to give up {wipes her tears}.

My family was doing really well financially. I will never forget Kaqusha[’s help]. She gave me time off for months. During the time I took my son to different hospitals to get treatment, she gave me medical leave, [she would say] “It won't be a problem.” And then I took six months off without pay and three months another time. At some point, she said, “You have to decide if you want to come back, I can't anymore.” And I said, “I will quit, I can't.” They were really difficult years, really difficult for me (cries).

At that time my brother came back from Sweden, he had constructed a few buildings in Albania and he opened Dardania Company, the first construction company in Pristina. They called me to go work there but, “I can't!” “You will come with us, we are all together.” And I got hired, I was the Head of sales, I worked with sales at the time. To be honest I felt sorry for my children. Having a family who is that rich, and now I would leave my children with no money. I gave it my all and I started building something for myself too. We rented our house out to the American Office which helped us a lot. I rented it out for five years. Actually, I don't know how much time went by after treating Kushtrim. We took him to the American hospital, to Tirana, we took him everywhere. But, the disease was so aggressive that there was nothing to do. And that's what happened.

After a few years, Taulant finished high school and wanted to study jazz guitar. He took his entrance exam in Austria, in Graz. He passed the exam there and they told him, “It's a pity if you remain here, America is the place for jazz. You have nothing more to learn here.” He said, “Mother this is how it went, but the costs are immense,” he didn't say he was going. To be honest, I thought and thought about it. I said to myself, I spent so much money on Kushtrim's medicine, at least he's going there for something good.

We were doing well, and I started to work with construction a little. Our son had brought us something [income] from England, he had worked for I don't know how many years. We had rented our house out to the American Office, and that was it. And we were doing well financially. We tried scholarships and stuff, but there was nothing. It was about 40 thousand dollars per year. I sent Taulant to America. He achieved success in what he wanted, he became one of the best. We helped him at first and then his school made his last year free. He worked something for himself, although it was difficult to work in America since we had no means to send him money for rent among other things. He did it himself. He also took his girlfriend with him. Now they are together.

Anita Susuri: And you... you stopped your work there and didn't get to retire, or? At the Road's Enterprise?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: No, I retired.

Anita Susuri: You retired?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Yes, yes. Yes, yes. I reached the age when I became 65. I retired when I became 65 and I fulfilled the 15 years [of work] which are required. That is another great misfortune, so all the people that were fired from Serbia at the time, they [our system] are favoring them [Serbia]. The ones fired, they can't get their pension. They need to have 15 years [of work] before '89.

Anita Susuri: Mrs. Igballe...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: And I...

Anita Susuri: Yes, go on.

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: I got employed in '71, so until '79 [she means '89], I reached the 15 years required, I got the benefits, it's not actually a pension but I managed to get it.

Anita Susuri: I wanted to go back a little because you told me you also participated in the blood reconciliations, if you could tell us a little about your experience?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: At the time, Flamur, [Flamur Gashi](#) was living [renting] in my house. Our house was in Arbëria, and we had the floor downstairs. Actually one day I told him, he was with the party, the Democratic League, I said, "Why *bre* Flamur only with the Democratic League?" He said, "You're the first to bring me that list to sign and I don't want to leave." So, we all tried to contribute something. We participated in blood reconciliations a few times and in that big reconciliation of...

Anita Susuri: At Verrat e Llukës?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: At Verrat e Llukës. We all went with that enthusiasm, with that joy that something good for Kosovo is happening. The police chased us, it was a mess on our way back, we could barely come back. So, I didn't directly participate since I didn't know any of the cases, but I went to the gatherings, wherever they took place.

Anita Susuri: What did you think of this initiative, how did you feel when you were present in those reconciliations?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: It's, it's... I don't know what to tell you, those are mixed feelings. There were very difficult cases, someone whose son was killed, and now they would have to shake hands. But, only the ones who are strong, the ones who have a big heart do that. That reminds me of when I read Adem Demaçi's book, "Not the ones who are brave to raise the hand of crime, but the ones who are brave to hold out their hands for reconciliation." So, it always came to mind. There were tears of joy as well as mixed feelings. But it was a really good step for Kosovo. It was close... to leaving behind the old customs, to hold out the hand for reconciliation, to be united.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember a specific case? Or one that left you, that was stuck...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: To be honest, all of them were very specific. I don't know which one to single out because they were all very touching. In touching cases, there were mothers who forgave their son's blood. There were dads who reconciled. There were sisters who had no one else, they lost their only brother... and those sisters held their hands out. So, very mixed feelings, a lot of bitterness, a lot of sadness. But, also a pride which... because they all felt proud when they reconciled, they found common ground.

Anita Susuri: I am sure the day of announcing independence was very important for you. What was that day like for you?

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: (Smiles). To be honest with you, for some time after I was working in Klllokot, at Nana Naile spa.

Anita Susuri: Does it belong to your family or...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: It's my brother's. My brother owns Nana Naile spa and he named it after our mother. He hadn't seen my mother for a long time although she went to visit him with different people's passports twice. But, he wasn't here for twenty years. My father never saw him after he left. He built a mosque minaret for him because our father was very religious. He wasn't an Imam, but he was religious, he was dedicated. He built the mosque minaret in our village Maxhunaj.

While he named Nana Naile spa after our mother, Nana Naile. Although Sabri wanted to name his daughter after her because his last child was a girl. He said, "Mother, I want to name her after you because I won't have any more children." "Nope," my mother said, "you will never name her after me, she will curse me. I want to name her." And she named her Vjendita [Alb. meaning: The day will come], "Because the day will come at some point." And she named her Vjendita.

So, when independence was announced, I was in Klllokot. It was a joy I can't describe, it was a feeling... I don't know how to put it, it was something we worked for, we were born and raised in that spirit of patriotism, to see something [good] for Albanians. We kept saying the whole time, "Self-determination, freedom, democracy, independence" And now that day has arrived. To be honest, if I wasn't... if I wasn't grieving for my son, it was an indescribable joy (cries).

Anita Susuri: Mrs. Igballe if there is something you would like to add, something I didn't ask you or didn't know...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: I only want to tell you how I became a driver at 68 years old (laughs).

Anita Susuri: Okay (laughs).

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: How I became a driver at 68 years old (laughs).

[The interview was interrupted here]

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: We bought a property in Albania. We had that great desire for Albania, and actually, Albania and Kosovo are one. Now we don't have borders, we don't have anything [dividing us]. I got Albanian citizenship. Although they ask for a lot of documents, it's like getting German citizenship (laughs). And while I stayed there the whole summer, I saw so many women from the village there driving I said to myself, "I will give it a try..." I had a hundred opportunities [to get it], but as soon as the children grew up a bit, it was the financial situation that... let my sons get a license. And then, after Kushtrim, I didn't think I would be able to live anymore, let alone drive.

So, everything goes with time. I said to myself, "You know what? I will give it a try. I don't believe I will be able to become a driver, but I will at least try." And I enrolled in the driving school in Qerret. And I went to ask them, "Is there a time limit, an age limit?" (laughs). They said, "No, there is no age limit. If the physician gives you the medical certificate which states you're able to drive," they said, "there is no issue." I was actually doing well health wise and I practiced for a few days. Actually during the practice, during the lectures, the instructor would ask questions, he said, "How are you not ashamed? She could be your mother and she's understanding it better." I would laugh. Not like a mother, but your grandmother (laughs).

And I passed the driving exam. I would practice well because Qerret is a flat place which has enough space to practice. And I wrote it, in Albania, they usually write "new driver," and they put it on a piece of paper behind the car, so the other can be careful (laughs). And I would joke about it, "New driver? When someone stops me, I'm an old woman, how am I a new driver?" (laughs). And now I go there by myself. Actually, recently Fadil has an eye problem, he can't see well, he can't drive, so I drive him. Although he is scared, I tell him, "I wasn't scared with you for 45 years and now you are." But, strangely women are still discriminated against in our nation. It's like they're scared of women [drivers].

We were going somewhere, and when we stopped at the border, Fadil was on the side to give our documents, because the cabin was on that side. And he asked him, "Are you scared?" He said, "No, why?" He said, "An old woman is driving you." I said, "Wow, I hope you get old, until when will this discrimination against women go on?" I said, "He is much older than me" (laughs). I said, "If he was driving me, would you ask me 'Are you scared that an old man is driving you?'" So, I became a driver at my old age.

Anita Susuri: Alright, if there is something else...

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: I don't know, I have a lot, I don't want to get into anything else (laughs). Hopefully it came out...

Anita Susuri: Thanks a lot for your patience and your time.

Igballe Novosella Mehmeti: Thank you for the invite.

Anita Susuri: You are welcome.