

INTERVIEW WITH NEXHMI ZEQRIRI

Pristina | Date: March 29, 2022

Duration: 59 minutes

Present:

1. Nexhmi Zeqiri (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: Mister Nexhmi, if you could introduce yourself, tell us about yourself and where you come from?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes. Hello to you and your show. I am Nexhmi Zeqiri, born on May 11, '58 in Podujeva. My family originates from Bellasicë, which is the furthest village on the border with Serbia. They came from Topolica around 1878, when Serbs forced Albanians out of their lands in Topolica. It was called Sanjak of Niš. At that time, my grandfather moved with his family, and my great grandfather, to the village of Bellasicë. My father, and my [paternal] uncles and aunts were born there. [From] there, my father moved to another village.

My grandfather, Bejtush Bellasica, was known at the time as a hard working man, a man of his time, and was friends with Ahmet Selaci from the Shalë area. They were people who had a lot of livestock, a lot. And one day, he decided to sell his fortune and flee near the Plateau of Podujeva, in that area, in a village called Sfeçël. They bought land, sold livestock, and he also sold his property which he had there because it was at risk from the Serbs, as that area bordered Kuršumlija, our zone, and with Laposavić on the other side. Feeling at risk, he sold his livestock and thought of coming to buy land in a village called Sfeçël.

My father was six years old at the time [and he was] together with my uncles, five of them, and my two aunts. But, before he could bring all of his family members, the Serbs ambushed him along with some Albanian spies, like there always were, servants of Serbs, and they killed him at the age of 37. The mothers, their wives were compelled to take the children together with some of my grandfather's brothers and they came to the Sfeçël village. They were poor, left without their father, without their wealth.

What happened next? My father was six years old when he came to the village of Sfeçël, as I mentioned. They worked the land, they worked with livestock, and they were poor. I am talking about this, it happened, I would say, around, before 1930, sometime in 1927-8 if I'm not mistaken. And then my father and his brothers, three of them, grew up. At first, one of them went to work in Stari Trg in Trepça. He went there by foot from Sfeçla, with a few friends. They hired them at the Trepça

enterprise, at the mine. When my father went there with his brothers, my uncles were very young, around 16 years old. They had to work in the mine, it was difficult work. They got hired.

They first lived... since the road was long and they didn't have [means of] transportation, it took around ten hours to walk from Podujeva, through the villages of Stari Trg, to the Trepça mine. They lived in, there were some [residential] blocks for people who were alone, without families. Four-five people, six people, lived in a room with beds. But they were buildings built by the English, since Trepça was colonized by the English earlier on, I believe you know about it. They lived there, they went there whenever they could, and came back home after a week or two. They visited family members, but they were there without their family.

Over time, they got apartments from Trepça, later on when they had some experience. They got married and brought their families, they got apartments. I was born in Podujeva, although my father was in Mitrovica because at the time, although you could be in Mitrovica, the women had to go and work in the village because we were together, in togetherness. I spent my whole life, until I was 40, in Mitrovica. I finished elementary school in the Northern part and then also gymnasium.¹

During the time when I finished elementary school, the northern part had an elementary school that only went up to the fourth grade. Not more, because there were no Albanians. Gradually, Albanians acquired apartments and the number of Albanians and their children grew. A school that went up to grade eight opened, though with a lot of difficulties, but there were people who aided this process. And my generation was the first to finish the eight-year elementary school because before, it was only four years. There was resistance from the Serbs to not allow it, but it was done.

I also finished gymnasium in Mitrovica at Silvia Tomazini, a school which... a very good, impressive school. It was '73-'74 when I started it. I finished gymnasium in '77-'78 and then I went to Belgrade to study in the Faculty of Medicine. I enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine and I finished it in two-three years. I was also a soccer player at the time and I was professional, I did sports too. Belgrade required a lot of work, we didn't have people, we didn't have... it was a difficult situation. My parents had only one wage. Trepça really did offer us some scholarships at the time, they helped us with those scholarships. They helped us because I had my parents and two [paternal] uncles, and I also had my [maternal] uncle there in Trepça.

I finished two years of my degree in Belgrade, and then I transferred to Kragujevac. I played soccer for a former-Yugoslav club. I attended two more years of the Faculty of Medicine in Kragujevac. I came back during the last year, since I was in touch with a classmate, we fell in love over time, and I had a crush on her, with whom I live [with today]. She's a doctor, Sebahate Zeqiri, [she] is my wife with whom

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

I spend my life with, both at work and privately. And I thank her for the support she gave me, along with my parents.

Anita Susuri: Mister Nexhmi, I would like to go back and ask you about something because I thought it was very interesting that you mentioned your father worked...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: That's right.

Anita Susuri: Before the Second World War, but I am interested to know if he worked during the war too since even before the Second World War there were slaves who worked in Trepça. Do you have any stories about your father?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes, yes. No, my father didn't tell me anything like that. My father, I think he started working in Trepça, if I'm not mistaken, around the '50s, '48-'50, around that time. Yes actually, during that time, but he didn't mention anything about slaves. It was a difficult job. At first they worked more on dry drilling in the dust. A difficult job, incredibly difficult. Fortunately my father finished vocational school while he was in Kamenica, and later university as well. Education helped him, my father was a mining engineer later on, but he started out as a manual worker.

Later on he finished another school where the enterprise sent them in order to increase the quality of the workers. He was a supervisor, and then later an engineer as well. It was a difficult job, a difficult job. And I had the opportunity to see their work, since I worked as a physician later. When I finished university in '84-'85, I was hired in Zveçan, in the occupational medicine dispensary. I had the scholarship, I was in the position as a new physician and I had a lot of work with the miners. If you have any questions about this process, I don't want to elaborate too much.

Anita Susuri: Yes, I am interested to know about the period when you were a child, it was sometime in the '60s.

Nexhmi Zeqiri: That's right.

Anita Susuri: And it was a pretty difficult period because of everything that happened in Ranković's² era, when people were forced to emigrate. What did you see the city and society like at that time?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: I will say the reality, I studied medicine in Belgrade and Kragujevac in the '70s, in the mid '70s, it was '77-'78 when I went to Belgrade. I am speaking honestly, I didn't feel inferior or ignored. I slept in the same room with serbs, in the dorms. You couldn't see anything like that amongst

² Aleksandar Ranković (1909-1983) was a Serb partisan hero who became Yugoslavia's Minister of the Interior and head of Military Intelligence after the war. He was a hardliner who established a regime of terror in Kosovo, which he considered a security threat to Yugoslavia, from 1945 until 1966, when he was ousted from the Communist Party and exiled to his private estate in Dubrovnik until his death in 1983.

the youth. But during the exams, an instance happened where I told the professor, I'll mention this interesting detail, "Please, could you make this question in Albanian, and then I'll answer in Serbian?" She grabbed my *indeks*³ and threw it in my face. A professor threw it in my face. She told me, "If you want [to study] in Albanian, you have Tirana and Pristina. This is Serbia and here we speak Serbian," and she failed me. So, stuff like that happened with professors. I studied well enough for an eight or nine,⁴ [but] they gave me a six.⁵

While among friends I was someone who knew the language, since I grew up in northern Mitrovica, I didn't have much... I am telling you the reality. I can't say anything about... I can only say that I didn't feel bad for myself. And Albanians in general, it was a kind of life that, random people or my colleagues didn't treat me differently, but when it came to professors, some did, some didn't. That's what that period was like.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned that you had a scholarship for studies from Trepça...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes, exactly.

Anita Susuri: How did the transfer from Kosovo to Belgrade happen? How did you experience it as a young person?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: An interesting life, a good life, a life without many problems. There was train and bus transportation. Nobody asked me, "Hey, why are you as an Albanian here, what are you doing there?" I studied, I knew the language. The books were in Serbian, Serbo-Croatian. You could go anywhere in Yugoslavia with, I mean... you could access medical service anywhere. Whether in Ljubljana, or Zagreb, or Macedonia, with your medical ID. So, I played soccer, and I made friends with Serbs. Most of them were like that, also Bosnians, Montenegrins, Croats, Slovenians, like that.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned that besides your studies you also did sports...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes, sports.

Anita Susuri: Did you also partake in the cultural and social life?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: In Belgrade at the time there was no kind of association which directly... because I was more attracted to sport. And I was the only Albanian studying medicine in Kragujevac, there weren't others because that's how it was... But I used to play football in a Kragujevac [sports] club called Radnički, and I was closer to Mitrovica since I lived there. Belgrade is 365 [kilometers] away from

³ *Indeks* were personal booklets issued to students under the old university system. It was used both as a student ID and grade register.

⁴ Grade B on a scale of 5-10.

⁵ Grade D on a scale of 5-10.

Mitrovica, while Kragujevac is 200 [kilometers away]. It seemed closer to me and I spent my time playing football at the time. This was the end of '70, nearing the end. So, I traveled, I visited home almost every two weeks. I would get homesick, it was close, Kragujevac, Belgrade. In general I have nothing negative to say about that time period when it comes to life as an Albanian. I am talking about when I lived in Serbia.

Anita Susuri: You mentioned you returned to Mitrovica after your studies...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes.

Anita Susuri: And because of the scholarship you had to continue...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes my family was there, I had my girlfriend whom I got engaged with after and she was studying Medicine in Pristina. And she would come visit me from time to time both in Belgrade and Kragujevac. And I started missing her, I wanted to be closer to her. During my last year, I came here and I got hired in Zvečan at the occupational medicine dispensary. I continued working in '80 ... Actually, I did military service after I finished university. I started working after two months. I was in military service in former Yugoslavia as a physician.

Anita Susuri: What place did you go to?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: I was in Trebinje, Montenegro at first, near the border with Bosnia. And then in Novi Sad for two months and I was in Slovenia for the rest of the months. [I went to] different places, in Kranj, Škofja Loka, Bled, Gorica, wherever they needed a physician. We were the last generation to work [in military service] as physicians.

Anita Susuri: How did they treat you when you worked as a physician in the military?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Excellent. They were very considerate, they had respect for me as a physician although I was a physician of general medicine. Some of the soldiers had tendencies to get you in sticky situations when it came to problems. But, I grew up in that area and I knew their real tendencies. Being a soccer player and a physician helped me to not go into paths they wanted me to. I told them, "I am a physician, I can talk about medicine and sports." I avoided problems, since there were attempts from Serb military members. Not from Slovenians, since I did most of it [military service] in Slovenia.

Anita Susuri: In what club did you play?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: The first club where I played was called Remonti. Remonti in Mitrovica. And then Kragujevac's Radnički, and Arandelovac's Shumadia, these ones are in Serbia...

Anita Susuri: I think there was Trepça [football club] too.

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes, Trepça too, Trepça too. So it was like that...

Anita Susuri: Did you also play for Trepça?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes, for some time. For some time, I was a part of... fortunately with some of my friends, with Rafet Prekazi who is one of the best football players today. We were in the same class in gymnasium, and then we started [playing] in Remont. Remont was a very good [football] club at the time, it was very big, all the Trepça players came out of Remont. That was the period of my youth.

Anita Susuri: When did you start playing in Trepça?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: In '84-'85. I started around that time and then I went on to military service. After returning, I continued working in Zveçan, one year later. I worked in Zveçan for two or three years and then they transferred me to Stari Trg with the request of Aziz Abrashi⁶ and [Burhan Kavaja](#). They came to a medical visit once and said, "Doctor, we need to transfer you to Stari Trg and we will give you an apartment there as part of working for the medical facility," along with one of my colleagues and our families. Anyway, I already got married in '85. My wife and I went to Stari Trg. We got an apartment as part of me working at the medical facility. Back then it was set up and organized. Physicians and their families could sleep near the ambulance. The apartments were given by the English earlier, not by us. We started working, the different processes began in '88, the miners' march to Pristina. And the miners' strike in '89.

Anita Susuri: Before we get to that, I am interested to know, for example, what kind of decisions were made? What were the complaints the workers had? How was the work environment?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: I fortunately entered the mine a few times too, since there were many injuries. As a physician, there have been accidental deaths, we call it, an ore could fall on a worker during the drilling and it could kill him, a big amount of ore. The drilling with machines. And then those small trains which transported the ore, it killed people, it killed miners or injured them. We often went down the mine, many meters underground, the eighth or ninth level, about 1800 meters deep. We ascertained the death or helped transport the miners upstairs. To give them first aid since the ore fell over them and they couldn't move.

The technician worked down there too, where they served down at the mine, a nurse. And then from time to time we went down there. There were injuries of different kinds. The temperature is very high,

⁶ Aziz Abrashi (1938-2014) was an economist, who led many important socially-owned enterprises. He was the general director of the Trepça Enterprise and led the enterprise during the most difficult period of the Miners' Strike 1989, where he was fired and sent to prison for 14 months together with other miners.

there is humidity, there is water, there are smells, there are situations... it happened that I didn't recognize my own father. I went there [as a child] to ask him who knows what... I must've needed something and when I went there, they were covered in coal dust. So, there was "Best of luck!" written everywhere at the entrance because there was life risk and difficult conditions at the time.

This was the work I did as a physician. Up in Stari Trg, we visited miners and their families in the ambulance. It was a type of ambulance where we worked for the miners and their families in that area.

Anita Susuri: In which part was this built...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: That was in the area that belongs to Kosovo, now it's the southern part where the enterprise is. Zveçan is where I started at first, the part that belongs to Zveçan, which is managed by Serbs today. That's where the foundry and the refinery are. That's where the ore was melted. That's where we would supervise in our station, and there were many cases of lead poisoning. The temperature was really high when the ore was melted, [reaching] 500-600 [degrees celsius], the steam from where the ore was melted poisoned the miners. Lead poisonings are really interesting. Fortunately, I had the chance to do my masters and PhD in this field, "Lead poisonings in Stari Trg, their impact on many factors..."

Anita Susuri: What were the consequences, for example?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Well the consequences, their teeth... I am talking about the part of Zveçan where the foundry is. The steam of lead and other metals damaged the nervous system. And then most of them had damaged teeth, damaged bones, since lead affects the bones the most and the nervous system. We refer to it as the bone locomotor, and the nervous system, these are the two things it attacks the most. I'm talking about the part in Zveçan where the foundry is.

While in Stari Trg, the disease the miners gets is called silicon dioxide silicosis. It's tiny particles that attack the lungs and the respiratory system and damages the lungs. And this disease is known as silicosis, it's part of occupational diseases. Their workplace caused it along with these other poisonings. But, in the Stari Trg mine, it's mostly silicosis, while in Zveçan's part where the melting happens, there's lead poisonings. They can be acute or chronic, but mainly acute.

Anita Susuri: Did the physicians back then [decide for themselves], for example, you decided your specialization beforehand?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes we did because I specialized in that field in '88, I got my specialization from Kosovo. I started it here, but it was interrupted and I continued it with my own money because of the miners' strike which happened in '89. And then I continued in Zagreb and in '91 I defended [my thesis] in Tirana, excuse me, in '93. I was in Zagreb in '91, [but] as soon as the war broke out, I returned. The

war in Croatia broke out and I went to Albania in '94 and I got the title of an occupational diseases specialist in Albania, from the Faculty of Medicine. This was the time period when I got my specialization because I left my job after the strike began in '89. A strike which was, if I can move on to that period or...

Anita Susuri: I wanted to talk about the march first...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes.

Anita Susuri: It began in '88...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: That's right.

Anita Susuri: A few months before the strike...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: That's right.

Anita Susuri: And there was a walk from Stari Trg to Pristina...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: To Pristina, true.

Anita Susuri: But I am interested to know, you, let's say a worker of that...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes. Of that complex.

Anita Susuri: How did you see that event from that point of view?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes, I will tell you honestly, the march was [a way to express] dissatisfaction among miners about the situation Kosovo was in at the time. There were attempts to amend the constitution and revoke Kosovo's autonomy, and the working class like always, the miners, are people who may be poorer, but they're maybe sharper, visionaries, they saw things a little more differently. People say it was political, maybe they didn't have power, maybe they were servants of the system during the time of former Yugoslavia.

The miners decided among themselves to make a march as a sign of dissatisfaction, to walk to Pristina. They didn't want to get on buses, they went from Stari Trg to Pristina in a few hours and that's where it began, [it was] some kind of revolution for raising awareness for Kosovo politicians at the time as well. There was [Azem Vllasi](#), [Kaqusha Jashari](#), there were some other people, Ali Shukriu⁷ in the [political] system.

⁷ Ali Shukrija (1919-2005) held important positions in the Yugoslav state.

The attempt was to eliminate some of the Kosovo leaders who were servants of Serbia and tell them that we don't agree with the revocation of Kosovo's autonomy. Kosovo was an autonomous part of Serbia, but with some federal authority. Not as a republic, but with the possibility to become like the [other] six republics and two provinces, we were part of it. The miners saw the suppression of our rights first and they stood up and reacted. They started the march and expressed their dissatisfaction.

We as physicians were ready. At the time we marched in case something happened, we would be there to give aid and the ambulance followed them in case someone gets sick, especially since miners were older people, there weren't many who were young.

Anita Susuri: You followed them with the ambulance?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes, yes, yes. We went along with them, we were behind looking if someone would get injured, if they needed help.

Anita Susuri: Were there any incidents?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: No, fortunately not. Fortunately not.

Anita Susuri: Most of the miners told us, that for example, miners were wearing their work clothes during the way.

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes exactly, that's true.

Anita Susuri: And most of them were wearing those uncomfortable work boots...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: True, true.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes they did hurt their feet but they weren't serious injuries, but of course, walking on those boots for ten hours, of course there would be issues, problems, issues, problems for sure. They didn't want to expose themselves too much and say, "I am sick." Their goal was to walk forward, to protect the rights of Albanians and they didn't worry too much about their own lives. They didn't even think about their health. They thought about the future of their children.

Part Two

Anita Susuri: After a few months, because the situation didn't improve, the political situation...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: That's right.

Anita Susuri: The strike began too. I am interested to know your point of view on the whole event, how it happened, how you saw it, if you could describe it?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes, the miners' strike, if I haven't forgotten, a long time has passed, it began on February 20 of '89 and lasted until February 28 of '89. So many things happened within those eight days that I can't explain it in a short way. I vividly remember how the event happened. I was a witness, I was the main doctor. I worked there in Stari Trg and the day the strike began, I was working the first shift.

Around 8:00, we received the information, because the medical facility was close to the mine, they said, "The miners have started a strike." My father was still alive, my mother and other family members. They were living in Mitrovica. And they said, "The miners' strike has begun. The miners are dissatisfied. Starting today, they started a strike and promised they won't come out until their demands are met." It began around 8:00. I received news that it was happening around 8:00.

At first we continued working at the ambulance in Stari Trg and gradually, we were compelled to become a part of [the strike], as some miners came at once, some of them were sick. One of them, an engineer who had epilepsy, came one night. The engineer supervised the work of the miners, the miners didn't want to work, [they were] on strike. The engineer, I don't know if he's [still] alive or not, came, he had epilepsy and we gave him first aid at the ambulance in Stari Trg.

Later on we were compelled to go downstairs, to see where the miners were. They were settled on different levels and we went to see if they were in good condition. They began to not eat, not drink anything. A sort of hunger strike, they expressed dissatisfaction through demands. Kosovo was alarmed, Yugoslavia was alarmed, as well as Serbia and the European and international community, [they heard] that a big miners' strike began in Stari Trg. We as doctors joined them, since we were also there on duty to help the miners with whatever they needed.

They were tired at first, exhausted. One night, two nights [passed by], the situation and health of the miners began to worsen. We sent some [of them] to the Mitrovica hospital, but they didn't want to go to Mitrovica. The ones who were sicker wanted to stay there. And we spontaneously set up an ambulance station at the miners' canteen, restaurant. We began removing the chairs and placing the patients on some blankets and giving them an IV infusion or injection or whatever they needed. This station was set up spontaneously, because the number [of patients] began increasing.

We also gave aid to them inside the mine because some of them didn't want to come up to the station. They would say, "No, I won't be separated from my friends and come upstairs and lie down comfortably while my friends stay." Some even set up a station with 20, 30, 40 beds. Nobody wanted to go to Mitrovica because there were some Albanian doctors, some Serbian doctors who were against the miners' strike and against... and they used to mistreat them. None of them went.

It was the help we gave them, the doctors and nurses who were working there, later on we received help from Pristina too, from the Faculty of Medicine, and some from Mitrovica, but we carried most of the burden. There were also spies there, Albanian doctors, some of them live in Belgrade today, Albanians, there are. They are in Belgrade today, they worked and acted against our values. But, we continued aiding the process.

At some point we also ensured some beds from the [residential] blocks where people lived alone. The patients who were getting IV infusions got [on those beds]. Actually, one person, maybe he's since passed, we gave one of the miners a banana, he said, "I am not a monkey," he said, "I am not a monkey. Oranges either," (laughs) he said, "don't give me any of these. I am going downstairs, I don't want to stay here anymore." He went back to the mine sick. So, this was a seven-eight day period when we told the alarming situation in conferences we held down in the mine.

At some point later, some people from Serbia also came to visit Trepça, the health minister at the time in Yugoslavia, he was Macedonian, Janko Obočki.⁸ In Kosovo, there was [Skender Boshnjaku](#), who is alive today and still works. We corresponded with him, we accepted the situation, with their help. There was a person, he was the Health Minister of Kosovo. We had a good time with him, very good, and I still thank him to this day, he is a good man. We organized the work together.

Anita Susuri: I think there were many people who offered help, for example from Slovenia and Croatia too.

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes, they did, Croatia's minister, I unfortunately forgot his name, Slovenia offered help as well, their Health Minister. There were also journalistic teams who came to warn about the situation, mostly from Slovenia, none from Serbia. We faced pressure to not help them [the miners] there [in the mine], but to send them for [medical] visits in Mitrovica. But, despite the pressure we had from our directors and from... we didn't stop, we continued our work with the miners there.

Seven days, with my daughter, Nita, I was checking her because my wife... we were living in Stari Trg, she said, "Our Nita is sick." They called me from the mine and I dropped the stethoscope and went straight to them. So, I couldn't check on my daughter because they called me down to the mine,

⁸ Janko Obočki (1935) is a former Macedonian surgeon, neurosurgeon, Prime Minister and Minister of Health of the SFRY and SR Macedonia.

“Come urgently.” This was a time period which today I remember in a very unique way. A very, very difficult time.

Today it’s easy to go out to protest and oppose our system, but opposing the Serbian system was... since there were guns, Kosovo was surrounded. It’s easy today to protest and throw stuff at the Prime Minister, very easy. Like that. It was a very alarming situation because the patients, the miners, didn’t want to eat or drink, [they] revolted. But in the end, the political class of Kosovo were deceived by Yugoslavia, they tricked the miners to come out. They thought this person would resign from their position, that person would resign from their position.

The miners were imprisoned, and the strike ended. The miners were in prisons, in courts, unemployed, in poverty. That was the period of ‘89 and the strike. If I managed to elaborate on it, that is it more or less.

Anita Susuri: Yes, but I am interested to know about some other details as well, since for example, I can say that each and every miner mentioned they came out with bandages all over...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes, over their eyes. Well down [in the mine] it’s dark, but there are some very dim lights. When the demonstrators came out, they had to put bandages over their eyes immediately. Together with our health minister, and other Croats, they said, “It’s better to protect them from the light because it could damage their eyes.” All of them came out with bandages because they didn’t see [light] for eight days and eight nights. It’s dark in the mine, it’s like neon lights, they’re dim. And it was a period when they gradually took the majority of them [miners] and imprisoned them and mistreated them, even in hospitals... it was a dark, evil period for us. It’s true what you mentioned. They had to come out of the mine with their eyes covered to protect them.

Anita Susuri: Do you remember how long it took them to leave the mine? Since there were 1300 miners.

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes, well to tell you the truth it was about seven, eight, ten hours. But we were organized well. Fortunately nobody died in the mine. There were miners whose family members died, and they didn’t want to attend the funeral, they didn’t want to leave their friends. There was a promise, there was a *besa*⁹ there, do you understand? Today you don’t see that. The miners back then were more organized than our political class today. It’s very surprising, very surprising! Because nobody had personal interests then, there was a national interest. And that’s what makes that time period different from today.

⁹ In Albanian customary law, *besa* is the word of honor, faith, trust, protection, truce, etc. It is a key instrument for regulating individual and collective behavior at times of conflict, and is connected to the sacredness of hospitality, or the unconditioned extension of protection to guests.

Anita Susuri: I am interested to know from your point of view as a physician, how did you see the change in the miners' condition from day to day? Both mental and physical.

Nexhmi Zeqiri: The mental and physical condition was getting worse every day, so at the time, I will only talk about the speeches the miners gave when the Yugoslav leaders visited them, no politicians today can give speeches like that. They had nothing written down, it was all their words.

So much that in one moment, it was Mursel Haziri, he lives somewhere abroad I believe, and Radiša Gačić, he was a Croat, he said, "My father was a miner too," he said, "are you a miner as well because you're really good at elaborating," he [Mursel] said, "Yes, yes," he said, "my father was a miner too, but I know how to write and read," he [Radiša] said, "I don't believe that you're a miner." He replied, "Trust me, I am a miner." They couldn't convince themselves that there are miners who are smart and skillful. They thought all of them were illiterate.

Anita Susuri: Were you present when there were visits from delegations?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes, we escorted them, for example, to the elevator. They entered with Radiša Gačić and Stipe Šuvar, [both] Croatian. At the time, Stipe Šuvar was an official. We went to the elevator together. And one of them says, "By God, they won't let the miners get out," he said, "really?". Stipe Šuvar and Radiša Gačić and others that were there became frightened.

We went to the mine and two or three miners gave a speech. They became so emotional, for better or worse, they couldn't believe they were miners. Their speeches were so good, that at one moment, one of the miners fainted. We gave him [first] aid, I revived him myself there. Isa Qosja¹⁰ had some photographs during the revival, but they took them from him afterwards, Isa Qosja was a director. He was present because it was being filmed, so it could be documented that the leaders of Yugoslavia came to visit the miners.

But they said, "We won't leave." Stipe Šuvar said, "They really mean it because my father," he said, "was a miner and the miners are the first set of people that see what's going on." That was that period. We then continued work for a little while. They fired us, around...

Anita Susuri: What did you think would happen next? You saw the consequences of the strike, you saw...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes, some of the miners and leaders were taken to prison, they were sentenced to a few months in prison. Me and some of my colleagues were also taken by the police and they asked us, "Who made you set up an ambulance there? Why did you help them and not send them [to Mitrovica's hospital]?" We explained to them that it was spontaneous, not planned.

¹⁰ Isa Qosja (1949) is an Albanian film director.

It took some time, we went there a few days in a row for interrogations, “How did the event happen?” But, fortunately, the presence of Yugoslavia’s minister at the time maybe saved us, and that he came there to visit them, and [the presence of] our minister Skender Boshnjaku and that we were hired there as physicians. It was our duty to help there. So, they didn’t punish us in that manner, with prison or anything. But when it was time for the dismissals, they fired us from our jobs, we were left unemployed.

Anita Susuri: Were you there when the second strike happened? Was there a second strike?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes, yes. I was there...

Anita Susuri: Who were violently removed.

Nexhmi Zeqiri: They were violently removed, they got there with the police and removed people from the mine.

Anita Susuri: They didn’t have help or anything...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: No, no, no, no. They took them and sent them to the police by themselves. The system was different, since there were less [miners] the second time.

Anita Susuri: There was a violent director at the time too?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes, yes, I know. Shala if I’m not mistaken. Shala [is his last name], but I forget his first name. You have knowledge because you researched the process (laughs). A violent director.

Anita Susuri: I think he was in that position until ‘90...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: That’s right.

Anita Susuri: Yes, yes, I am interested because most [of the miners] told us that after the strike, the work never went back to normal.

Nexhmi Zeqiri: No, there was no more normality. There were violent workers and directors who were servants. The core dissipated. They gave us some documents, “Do you recognize the Serbian state?” We informed our independent union, I was the Head of it. We created it in Bajgorë. There were some physicians who were older than me, I said, “No we don’t dare, we can’t.” And we created the union at a nurse’s house in Bajgorë, The Independent Trade Union of the Trepça Occupational Medicine Agency.

We sent it to the director who was Macedonian, he said, “*More*,¹¹ don’t do this because Serbia is powerful,” I said, “Alright we won’t be part of the union.”

Unfortunately two Albanian doctors didn’t become members of our union. We created our union which was working, they fired most of us from work, though some of them remained working. It was a duty, if we accepted Serbia, it was in contradiction with the workplace. We were unemployed, we continued our activity with the union, it was political and there were many loyal people who didn’t conform. They left everything to continue their mission and get away from Serbia, that was a period...

Anita Susuri: I am interested to know about how the ‘90s were for you? [You were] Unemployed...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes, very problematic. We organized around the union, I was part of the Independent Health Union, in Kosovo’s Leadership, with the late Dr. Bajram Rexhepi¹² and a few other colleagues, we created the union at the state level. We were trying to organize and help some of our colleagues. And then we organized and set up an ambulance which was called the humanitarian ambulance. Doctor Bajram Rexhepi, former prime minister...

Anita Susuri: In Mitrovica, right?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: In Mitrovica, we lived in Mitrovica. It was the people who were fired from the hospital and the other [medical] centers and we created a hospital called The Humanitarian-People’s [Hospital]. We created it somewhere in Tavnik, a Mitrovica neighborhood. We worked there 24 hours a day. We created it and we offered help. The lab was working, all the physicians were engaged, day and night, 24 hours. We did great work at the time. On top of it, through the union, we helped several physicians and their families who couldn’t afford to...

I worked there in the ambulance, I actually also worked at... I was a specialist and I worked, I sold medicine at a pharmacy so I could take care of my family. This was a period with no jobs and it was very difficult. Later on, the Nënë Tereza hospital also opened. I was active there and I was the director of three ambulances: one in Koshtova, one in Mitrovica and one in, two in Mitrovica, in Bair. Three ambulances where we offered medical service through the union were based in Pristina, and had an office in Mitrovica. This happened in ‘93-’94-’95.

We actively worked in the Nënë Tereza hospital. My wife was active too. She’s a physician, and there were also other colleagues. We all worked at the Nënë Tereza ambulance and at The People’s ambulance in Mitrovica without being paid. But, yes, we would receive help, pasta, beans, and some other food items offered by the Nënë Tereza organization. But we didn’t get paid.

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

¹² Bajram Rexhepi (1954-2017) was a medical doctor in the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) who served as the first elected post-war Prime Minister and later as Interior Minister of the Republic of Kosovo.

Anita Susuri: How did you manage to live through those conditions?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Well, it was very difficult at the time. Life can be anything, but we survived with the food items we received from Nënë Tereza. I mentioned earlier, I also worked at a pharmacy, I was paid 300 *marka*¹³ [a month] if I'm not mistaken. There were some guys who opened a pharmacy, I survived through that [my wage there] and the help we received. My children were small, we lived in northern Mitrovica.

Actually my wife and I worked in the High School of Medicine in Mitrovica, we taught at houses.¹⁴ We were an active part of education. We worked on that a lot as well. So, in the People's Ambulance in Mitrovica, in the Nënë Tereza ambulance, and in education. These were the three things we worked on during that time.

Anita Susuri: What was it like to work at home schools?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Very difficult. The conditions were bad. The will was great, but the police stayed near the windows. They would bring us out, "What are you doing here?" We dealt with these kinds of problems. We had so many issues.

Anita Susuri: Could the learning process remain normal?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: To some extent. To some extent. I can't say we made a big deal, but we never stopped the [educational] process. We taught at houses, at schools. I am talking about Mitrovica's medical school, where I worked. That was it.

Anita Susuri: What were the following years like, in '98, how to put it, after the Jashari family was killed¹⁵ and we had a war...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: That's right.

Anita Susuri: The intensity of the war grew. What was that like for you?

¹³ 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*.

¹⁴ By 1991, after Slobodan Milošević's legislation making Serbian the official language of Kosovo and the removal of all Albanians from public service, Albanians were excluded from schools as well. The reaction of Albanians was to create a parallel system of education hosted mostly by private homes.

¹⁵ The massacre of the entire family of the Jashari in Prekaz, Drenica, March 5, 1998 marks the beginning of the Kosovo war.

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Difficult years, very difficult. It was the atmosphere of a war. That process began in '98, maybe in '97, I don't remember very well. These guerrilla units led by Zahir Pajaziti¹⁶ and his friends, began to go and attack Serbian cops who were more violent in different police stations in Kosovo. So, Zahir Pajaziti and his friends. And the situation began getting more agitated, life was getting riskier.

But, we continued our activities, we continued our lives. We didn't go abroad although we could, we were offered, but we didn't feel spiritually well if we left Kosovo at that time, although it was difficult. My wife and I could've gone abroad together with our two children. We had the opportunity to leave, we were physicians who were violently fired from our jobs, but no, we stayed in Kosovo. The processes of armed confrontations began from our people and we were an active part of that process, my wife and I.

The problems began immediately during the war in '98-'99, [when] the war [began]. During that time we were still living in Mitrovica with our two children, we were renting because they weren't giving apartments anymore, we were left without an apartment. We began renting in the northern part [of Mitrovica]. That's where we did daily activities with friends, we had meetings, we had... and the big war broke out. It began in Drenica earlier than anywhere else, but it could be sensed in Mitrovica too.

Me and Dr. Bajram and a few other colleagues decided to become an active part of it and we began going to Shalë, we would go in order. There were more surgeons and orthopedic doctors and stuff, but also us as specialists, went to Shalë to supervise. During the war...

Anita Susuri: You went there to offer the soldiers...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes, yes, help, yes. But also during the war when the NATO bombings started, they started around March 24. At the time we were in the north and we were at risk. I lived near the hospital, in the northern part, and my parents were there as well. Latif Berisha was killed that night as well as the famous writer and also LDK¹⁷ activist, Agim Hajrizi, together with his son, who was friends and classmates with my son. Others were also killed on March 24, the night of the bombings, all were Albanian.

We stayed in the north that night. I also brought my parents who were in their apartment to a stay with us in the house I was renting. The next day we went south, we took what we had in small luggages and we went to the southern part. We went to Tavnik, it's a neighborhood where we had relatives. And then we went to Zhegrova to some other relatives, they were relatives of my wife's father, friends. And they hosted us for a week.

¹⁶ Zahir Pajaziti (1962 – 1997) was an Albanian commander of the KLA. He was the first Commander of the KLA, known as "First Gun of Freedom." He was killed on 31 January 1997 in a gunfight with Serbian forces.

¹⁷ Alb. *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* - Democratic League of Kosovo. The first political party of Kosovo, 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.

The ambulance was there during that time, the one Dr. Bajram organized together with some other colleagues. Me and my wife [contributed too], my wife would check the children, and I would assist Dr. Bajram in the ambulance for about five or six days. That was a dangerous week, going from one house to another. That's what happened during that period. And we were at risk, wondering what we would do next. We had nowhere to go. I was with my two children, my parents, my brother.

We continued moving [to different places], and then Dr. Bajram said, "At around 2 am, we won't be here in this ambulance anymore, you have your parents, children and wife, try to find a solution, however you can. My wife and daughter aren't here in Kosovo. I have my revolver, I have two grenades, I have explosives, I won't fall into their hands. I have it easier." He was a great man, a great patriot, there is no match for him.

We separated, we said goodbye. I took Agnesa and we went to the station to see if we could go somewhere, there was a bus to Macedonia. I made the decision, together with my family, to go to Macedonia. My wife went to the north since her mother was still there. She pleaded, "Come *bre*,¹⁸ come!" She died after the war here in Pristina. "No," she said, "I have children in Pristina, I can't leave them." Separated.

We went to Macedonia for a night, and then continued to Germany. We were worried and missing our family... after two or three weeks, I got a passport to come back and see what's happening. My wife, children and other family members remained there. I didn't go back to Germany anymore. I immediately found something, the French were in northern Mitrovica, and Albanians began to work in these institutions as physicians. And I got a Serbian apartment, we had nowhere to go in the north. I am talking about the southern part, it was near where the Center for Family Medical Care is today in Mitrovica. And I told my wife, "Take the children and get on a plane," she came after three weeks.

We started working in Mitrovica's Hospital together. We went there by bus because we had no other way. With the help of UNMIK, they brought us in.¹⁹ God saved us and we avoided being killed by Serbs because we were thinking we got all of Kosovo. And we continued working, and then Serbian protests and problems began, Mitrovica's hospital was closed. And after four or five days I decided to come to Pristina to continue work and life.

I traveled from Mitrovica to Pristina for about two years and then I moved here with my family, where I continue to live and work at the University Clinical Center of Kosovo together with my wife who is a professor and a doctor of physiotherapy. [We live] Together with our two children.

Anita Susuri: I am interested to know something about the war...

¹⁸ Colloquial: used to emphasize the sentence, it expresses strong emotion.

¹⁹ United Nations Mission in Kosovo.

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Go ahead.

Anita Susuri: There were some lines of people in Mitrovica, people were forced to leave their homes...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes.

Anita Susuri: Did that happen to you?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: I left where I was living early on because I was surrounded by Serbs non-stop. There wasn't a line [for me], I immediately left the house, so on March 25 or 26. I went to the southern part and joined Dr. Bajram in treating patients.

Anita Susuri: How was your journey to Macedonia? What was the journey like?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: A journey which I hope nobody experiences. I am speaking out of fear, nothing happened to us. But, the police and the paramilitary would stop us and I feared for my little daughter, and there were other people, the bus was full. And it was an unpleasant situation. My brother and his wife and kids were with me, but my daughter was a little more grown up, and we were scared because they would take people out of the bus and they would never see their family members again. The road to Skopje, I mean to Han i Elezit, had a hundred obstacles. Fortunately we avoided the worst.

Anita Susuri: What about when you came back from Germany, how did you find the place? In what condition?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: It smelled like ash, a burnt smell, and dust, there were a lot of collapsed buildings. On July 5 [1999] I think, I came here to Pristina and I went to Mitrovica to see my sister in the southern part. I slept over at my [paternal] aunt's [house] in Pristina, the next day I was at my sister's and then I visited my mother-in-law in the northern part. She stayed there all the time, she didn't want to leave her house. She stayed there during the entire war, in the north, among Serbs. But she survived, fate saved her.

Anita Susuri: You said that you are currently living in Pristina and that you are still working here...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Yes.

Anita Susuri: You also have your children...

Nexhmi Zeqiri: I do.

Anita Susuri: How is your life now?

Nexhmi Zeqiri: A satisfactory life to some extent because the political class in Kosovo is not working how they should. They're after their personal interest and their parties' interest. We didn't imagine them in this condition. I came back from Germany with a lot of will, on a [Volkswagen] Golf 2. I came from Germany through Italy and I was very happy. There was a long line of people. It took me 10-15, 20 hours to arrive in Pristina from Durrës, and I didn't imagine this situation, I didn't imagine it, nor did most people. Even the vocabulary of people in the parliament is low.

A miner today could give a lecture to these people. I am honestly saying this. It's embarrassing, it's painful for Kosovo's parliament to deal only with themselves, out of spite for each other, they don't pass laws for Kosovo[']s good]. That's it. It's like these political parties were formed for their personal interests. You see the exodus of young people today, it's something to cry about that they're moving to Europe every day, through all kinds of opportunities, only so they can leave Kosovo. No order, no rule, no law, no decent employment based on merit, only through personal connections and clans. This is the problem that will cost us a lot one day, but I guess this is what life is like.

Anita Susuri: Mister Nexhmi, if there is something you'd like to add at the end.

Nexhmi Zeqiri: I have nothing to add, only that I hope our political class wakes up and works for the country, and not for power. To rule over their people is easy. But to increase the quality of the country and to fulfill the *amanet*²⁰ of those who gave their lives, they have to work a little differently. I hope the political class wakes up, and all of those who will work in politics in the future.

Anita Susuri: Thank you very much for your time.

Nexhmi Zeqiri: Thank you, you took me back to a very interesting time, I thank you from my heart.

²⁰ *Amanet* is literally the last will, but in the Albanian oral tradition it has a sacred value.