

# Oral History Kosovo

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## INTERVIEW WITH İSKENDER MUZBEG

Prizren | Date: January 25, 2022

Duration: 63 minutes

Present:

1. İskender Muzbeg (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 İskender, introduce yourself, what year were you born in, how did you spend your childhood?

**İskender Muzbeg:** Thank you, firstly I want to thank you once more for being interested in [interviewing] me. I was born in December of 1947 in Prizren. And then, after I grew up, I realized that these years were quite difficult. There were even people who were on the verge of starvation. My family was an average family. My father, during the Ottoman times, had finished *Rüştiyen*.<sup>1</sup> Between the two world wars, in different villages of Kosovo, he worked as an imam during Ramadan. I was born from my father's third marriage. When I was born in 1947, my father was 55 years old. Of course, the years of my childhood were difficult and at that time in Kosovo, as well as in Prizren, people generally went through very difficult situations.

I remember a story [about] sandals. I remember that one autumn day I wore sandals, that is, not shoes but sandals, I went to school wearing sandals, and during the break while playing, one sandal broke in half. I came back home to change but I didn't have other sandals to change into and I wore my sister's big boots and I went to school feeling embarrassed to wear those big boots. So, my childhood was quite difficult. In first grade... I was born in the Terzi neighborhood. In the Terzi neighborhood in Prizren. At the time, Prizren was small anyway. You went to Jeni neighborhood [the New neighborhood], after that, [there were] only gardens, there were gardens. Now Jeni neighborhood is considered as the center of Prizren. In this Terzi neighborhood, there was a small two story school. In the Hoça part of Terzi neighborhood.

My father enrolled me in that school, I remember it well. My first teacher was Sherif Kaçaniku. It was the 1955-56 academic year. And during that time there were many students but there weren't [enough] books. There weren't [enough] school textbooks, ABC books. I think around two-three months had passed, and then teacher Sherif gave us a notebook in which he had written with a pencil. In that notebook, he had copied the alphabet. The text for the letter A, for the letter B, and so on. That's why

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<sup>1</sup> Turk.: *Rüşdiye* is a secondary educational institution opened during the Ottoman Empire after the Edict of Tanzimat announced in 1839.

even now I remember teacher Sherif with respect. He taught us in the first grade and when we got to the second grade, Sherif Kačaniku passed away at an early age. We got a new teacher in the second grade.

I want to talk a little bit about the teachers because if I am able to say anything today, I owe it to them. In the second grade we got a teacher named Fehmi Dervishi. He taught us for one year as well and then left for a different mission. And then, Abdul Bahri Hafizi, our third grade teacher who was a very honorable man, he would dress very [well] but he asked a lot from us, his criteria was really high and in the third grade, nobody finished the year with fives.<sup>2</sup> Actually even the best students finished it with fours.<sup>3</sup> And in fourth grade another teacher which I really loved, Subi Pasuli, he was in different roles as well later on. He became director of the enterprise Famipa, et cetera. Of course, we also received lessons from Subi Pasuli. This is how four years passed for me in that elementary school.

And then another thing, the same school Mustafa Bakia but a different facility, different place, I went there for the fifth and sixth grade and in fifth grade, there was a Şerif Muhammet... a Turkish teacher with the name of an imam. He noticed that I wrote poems and he gave me a lot of support. In the sixth grade, I published my first poem in Skopje in *Sevinç* publications, in *Sevinç* magazine. There were no magazines or newspapers being published in Prizren. Actually there were no publications in the Turkish language anywhere in Kosovo. There were only radio broadcasts, no written broadcasts, no print media, so we turned towards Skopje. In Skopje there was the *Sevinç* magazine and my friends and I constantly sent articles to this magazine.

After finishing elementary school, where would we enroll? Like every young person, this question stressed us out, and I enrolled in gymnasium.<sup>4</sup> But, by the end of the first, second week in gymnasium, the teachers came, “Would you come to *Shkolla Normale*?<sup>5</sup> In the *Shkolla Normale* there is a class in Turkish that is being opened” they said. And we, half of that class, 10-15 people went from gymnasium to *Shkolla Normale*, and I finished *Shkolla Normale*.

**Anita Susuri:** Yes, first I want to ask you more about your childhood...

**İskender Muzbeg:** Go ahead...

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<sup>2</sup> Grade A on a scale of F-A.

<sup>3</sup> Grade B on a scale of F-A.

<sup>4</sup> A European type of secondary school with emphasis on academic learning, different from vocational schools because it prepares students for university.

<sup>5</sup> The *Shkolla Normale* opened in Gjakova in 1948 to train the teachers needed for the newly opened schools. With the exception of a brief interlude during the Italian Fascist occupation of Kosovo during the Second World War, these were the first schools in the Albanian language that Kosovo ever had. In 1953, the *Shkolla Normale* moved to Pristina.

**Anita Susuri:** You attended the Mustafa Bakia school. It was an old school and then you mentioned that the new school opened...

**İskender Muzbeg:** Yes, you can ask me questions in Albanian too.

**Anita Susuri:** *That one was older* [speaks in Albanian], what did that school look like?

**İskender Muzbeg:** That school was a small two story building, actually it was an old house. There were four rooms in that house and those four rooms were our school. There were four classes. It was taught in Albanian and Turkish. The classes were held in the morning and afternoon. So, there were a total of eight classes there. One, two, three, four. And then a big school was built, the Mustafa Bakia school was built. That school was of course a big school, a school which fulfilled all conditions. Done in a contemporary way, it was a school which was built in the beginning of the '60s. I'm going back again to the previous one, our school was like... somewhere in the middle of the Hoça neighborhood, a two story building.

**Anita Susuri:** *How was the family organized?* [speaks in Albanian]

**İskender Muzbeg:** Ours [mine]?

**Anita Susuri:** What did your mother do, your father? What did they do for work?

**İskender Muzbeg:** Of course, of course. My father as I mentioned earlier was an imam, he was a Ramadan imam. During my childhood, for one month, one month every year, he wasn't home. He would go to different villages, these were Albanian villages and he worked there as an imam [he helped them] pray. Not in exchange for money, they all gave him a bit of wheat, another one gave him corn and he came back with those bags, he came back from Ramadan and we celebrated Eid at home.

My mother was a homemaker, my mother was a homemaker but she knew how to embroider really beautifully. They ordered embroidery especially from here, you know for weddings, embroidery for shirts and for the head, she embroidered in *tashfez*.<sup>6</sup> I remember, they mostly ordered embroidery with hyacinths and lilies from the valley from my mother. She embroidered. Eh... there was power supply in many houses, there was still no power supply in our house and my mother [worked] with a [kerosene] lamp, I remember this now, she used a lamp in the evening, she didn't during the day because she did house chores, she would embroider in the evening under the lamp light. Later, my mother also started weaving cloth. She said she had a big *tezgjah*<sup>7</sup> and she wove cloth there. A woman took those cloths and sold them in the bazaar.

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<sup>6</sup> Small traditional hat with embroidery.

<sup>7</sup> A wooden tool or mechanical machine used to weave cloth, stuffing, carpets, etc.

Our house was never filled with people, my father, my mother, my sister and me, four people. So, there was one boy and one girl born into this family. In his first marriage, my father had seven sons, but unfortunately they all died when they reached the age of seven. Our house had a large yard, the cobblestones were beautiful but needed care. I still remember my mother who every day plucked the grass that grew between the stones. Our house had another feature, in our house there was a well, so a source of water. There... because there was no tap in the house at that time. Any house that had a well, or a source of water, that house was a lucky house. There was a well in our house, and that well is still there and there is water, there is very good water.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you still live in that house?

**İskender Muzbeg:** Yes, I still live in that place.

**Anita Susuri:** Or is it a newer house?

**İskender Muzbeg:** Of course the house, in our house there were two buildings, as my father explained to me, the building where we lived was built because of my grandfather's marriage. Upstairs there was a room, in front, a balcony and under that room there was a kitchen. But during the winter, they also used the kitchen as a room, because it was cold [they used it] as a room. I was born in the winter months, in the month of December, on December 19, and as my mother told me, I was born in that kitchen. I have also expressed this truth in my poems.

**Anita Susuri:** Do you remember how young people spent their time during that time?

**İskender Muzbeg:** Of course, of course. Prizren, *shadervan*<sup>8</sup> had the form [it has today]. But the other roads were soil and dust, there was no asphalt, but in some places there were cobblestones, so stones. The roads were quite dusty. Near our house there was a big square, in that square the children would play ball, but we were suffocated from the dust. In the evening, we had to wash at least our feet, face, and hands, because at that time there were no bathrooms in the house like there are today. In the past there were *hamamxhik*<sup>9</sup> and we used those *hamamxhik*. As I said, Prizren was small, but it had a beauty which you can't see today. What was there, there were small streams, water in every neighborhood.

There was a well-known intellectual in Prizren who passed away, Durmiş Celina. Durmiş Celina mentioned this too when he wrote about Prizren's waters. So Bristica, then Lumbardhi, the waters of Bistrice at the entrance of Prizren were divided and those waters passed from house to house and at the end they again connected with the river, they flowed. At my grandmother's house, I remember that

<sup>8</sup> The fresh water drinking fountain in the main square of Prizren. *Shadervan* (*Sadirvan* in Arabic) means precisely a fountain, built to provide water for more than one person at once, usually for ritual ablutions, and is a typical element of Ottoman architecture.

<sup>9</sup> Tur.: *hamamicik*, or the small baths, which were inside the homes for the hygiene of the family members.

the water did not pass into our house because our house is in the Terzi neighborhood and Bylbylderesi [The river of nightingale] is at a higher level. At my grandmother's house, which was in the center, there was such a stream of water. But in those days, they did not pollute these flowing waters. This was the rule for everyone, so the water that came to us was clean, the same water that passed from us to our neighbor would remain clean.

I only know that at my grandmother's house, after lunch, they washed the dishes in that water. Meaning it was so clean that you could even wash the dishes with it. Prizren had this beauty, of course, you know, there were many historical artifacts in Prizren. Mosques, masjids, these still exist. Of course some of them were destroyed. For example, I remember that there was a big mosque where our municipality building is now, it was destroyed, or here in front of the post office there is only a minaret of the Arasta mosque, the rest of it has been destroyed. So, over time this happened due to people's lack of care, it was not protected. However, today in Prizren, there are many historical monuments to see, visit, and learn about.

**Anita Susuri:** You started telling me about the *Shkolla Normale*...

**İskender Muzbeg:** Yes, and then in *Shkolla Normale*, in 1963 there was a Turkish language class in the gymnasium, in *Shkolla Normale* there were no classes in the Turkish language. The staff for Turkish education here was provided by the *Shkolla Normale* in Skopje. But over time, with social, political and cultural development, there was a need to open Turkish parallels here as well, and as I just mentioned, we started Turkish education in the *Shkolla Normale*. Who were the teachers who taught us Turkish? For example, there was Ömer Mısırlı who taught in Turkish. We were taught geography by a professor named Adnan Morina. We were taught history by Malih Osi.

We had teachers who understood Turkish, but could not teach in Turkish. They behaved with a tolerance, they explained the lesson to us, but when getting graded, when we were tested to get graded, we could speak in Turkish. For example, there was a Zekeriya Sofi, so these were Albanian teachers. Abdullah Shykriu taught us biology, but when he asked us questions, we gave him answers in Turkish, we spoke, and so on.

**Anita Susuri:** In those years when you were young, where did you spend your time?

**İskender Muzbeg:** Well now, at that time in the *Shkolla Normale*, like in all the schools, there were extracurricular activities. In other words, after class there were various activities, various literary activities and other activities, musical activities, choir. Our teacher [Xheladin Kastrati](#) led the choir, choral songs and our school's choir group was known in Yugoslavia as a very important group at that time. A school magazine related to extracurricular activities was published in our school. *Vllaznimi* [Alb.: Brotherhood] was published in three languages, *Kardeşlik*, *Vllaznimi*, *Bratsvo*, in three languages

and with a very simple technique that we call mimeograph, it was printed with that simple technique and distributed to the students. I worked at that magazine because I loved poetry.

Outside the magazine and school, there was the theater as part of poetry activities. There was a poetry theater and an amateur theater. Those who were drawn to theater went there, there was a very important theater artist, Hüda Leskovçali, who no longer lives. She has an important place in Prizren's history of culture, she prepared plays for the theater. In the theatrical performances there were Albanian dramas, Serbian dramas, and Turkish dramas and it was a very abundant activity. For this reason, in the mid-60s, a festival started to be held in Prizren because of this theater.

The evening festival of brotherhood and theater groups, amateur theater groups from all republics and autonomous regions of Yugoslavia came there every year and attracted great attention to Prizren. When I was at school, I also worked in the association Dođru Yol [Tur.: Straight road]. Initially, in the Dođru Yol association, they called me to work as a moderator of the program. Now I remember the director of Dođru Yol had told me, "Fix your hair a little and come, we have a program" and at the time, where now the Punëtori cinema is, there was a concert and for the first time I joined Dođru Yol in that concert as a moderator, a speaker as we called it. Later, in 1968, we founded the literature branch in the Dođru Yol association.

In fact, in the Dođru Yol association, which was founded in 1951, there was a literary group, but this group became inactive over time, people dispersed and went to different places, and in '67 we wanted to bring a new spirit and we founded the branch of literature. There I was elected Head again, for several years we organized literary classes, sometimes with music, sometimes we organized only literary classes, and now, unfortunately, there is not much interest in the literature of that time. For example, at least a hundred young people attended each literary class and read their poems and prose. In other words, Prizren was developing into a cultural mosaic with Albanians, Serbs, Turks, Bosniaks, Roma and everyone together.

**Anita Susuri:** *Did you go out in the city, did you walk around in the korzo,<sup>10</sup> what was that like parallel to cultural life?* [speaks in Albanian]

**İskender Muzbeg:** Well, so let's say there was a concert or theater, on the day of the concert in Prizren, there was a special liveliness. Everyone was preparing that in the evening there was a concert at the House of Culture or now in the garden of the Lumbardhi Cinema, maybe an hour before that [they went out] to *Shadervan* because you know that *Shadervan* is the center of Prizren. First at *Shadervan* in the *korzo* they went for a stroll, and then they went to the concert. Young life was not spent in cafes as it is now, even when we were in the *Shkolla Normale*, Hotel Theranda had a cafe, but it was not a thing to go to the cafe. We spent all our activities in the *korzo*, in sports competitions, there were painting and photography clubs, we also spent our time there in associations. Prizren had three very

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<sup>10</sup> Main street, reserved for pedestrians.

important cultural and artistic associations. Agimi is an association which I think was founded in '44. There was an association [called] *Budućnost* [Srb.: The future], there was also the Turkish artistic culture association *Doğru Yol*, which was founded in 1951.

**Anita Susuri:** You went to Pristina for university...

**İskender Muzbeg:** Yes, after I finished the *Shkolla Normale*, I didn't work as a teacher, I wanted to continue my education so I chose law. I enrolled in the Faculty of Law in Pristina. There we started with lectures, the lessons were in Serbian. At the beginning of the month, still getting used to Pristina, Pristina in quotation marks, the Pristina of that time was much different from the Pristina of today. I remember that except for the main road, all the other roads were muddy, of course later Pristina developed a lot.

In 1968, I enrolled in the Faculty of Law in Pristina, a few months later, in April 1969, the newspaper *Tan*<sup>11</sup> began to be published in Pristina and I was invited to [work for] this newspaper. In fact, an announcement was made, an opening, I applied to that opening and was accepted. That's how we started preparing the first issue of *Tan*. There was Safet Breka from Pristina, there was Enver Baki... I was from Prizren, there was my friend Bayram İbrahim, who also graduated from *Shkolla Normale*, he is a poet and now lives in Pristina. There was Müberra Tune from Mitrovica. And four or five of us decided to publish *Tan* with the permission of the relevant bodies and started preparing the first issue.

I remember that they gave space for *Tan*, it was a completely empty space. Two desks came with a truck and we put them somewhere. There was no typewriter, because you know that the Turkish language has the letters ö and ü, which are different letters. There was no typewriter [with these letters on it]. The director of *Tan*, Süleyman Brima had a typewriter [which] he brought, as well as Süreyya Yusuf also had a typewriter at the opening of *Tan*.

And so we started working at *Tan*, within a month we prepared the first issue, after preparations from April 1st to May 1st, *Tan*'s first issue came out. My writing was on the first page of the first issue. Of course I was young then, now when I look at those articles I don't really like all of them, but back then the articles were like that.

**Anita Susuri:** What were they related to?

**İskender Muzbeg:** Since the first issue's article was on the front page, it was about May 1st. Because [we worked on it] from April 1st to May 1st and the title of that writing was May 1st. So, what the importance of May 1st is, what is it, workers' day and so on, so for May 1st. In it, since we had no other magazines in the Turkish language, we paid a lot of attention to the pages about culture. In the culture

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<sup>11</sup> *Tan*, in translation, means dawn, as such it is the first Turkish-language newspaper after the Second World War, which began publication on May 1, 1969, and closed in 1992.



pages we included stories, poetry and cultural news, and we had a special page for children. We included poems and stories written by children.

Over time, I worked at *Tan* from 1969 to 1974. At the same time, I also finished university. I was studying, and Süleyman Brima, the director of *Tan* and the first responsible editor, contributed a lot to my graduation from university. Because he was a tolerant person who created the conditions for me to both work and continue my education. And I remember him with respect.

## Part Two

**Anita Susuri:** Where did you live?

**İskender Muzbeg:** In Pristina... I mean, when I enrolled in the faculty, they gave us dorm rooms, but there were two types of dormitories: dormitories for second and third year students and dormitories for first year students. Of course, according to the conditions of the time, they were not good conditions at all. We used to walk to bed with shoes on. It was a very simple place. But when I started working at *Tan*, a few months later, we were given an apartment at that time. We shared four rooms of an apartment with four journalists and the conditions were very suitable for working at that time. So, I finished university in time.

**Anita Susuri:** Where was that apartment located?

**İskender Muzbeg:** The apartment was at Tre Sheshirat or somewhere further beyond the Faculty of Philosophy. In fact, they had given that apartment to our director Süleyman Brima. Since he was in Prizren, he came and went every day, he gave that apartment to us and we studied in that apartment, Bayram İbrahim was there, I mentioned him a little earlier, Altay Sürey was also in that apartment, whom we employed later. We also had a photojournalist, Sedat Shporta, all four of us used a room in that apartment.

**Anita Susuri:** What was it like to live in Pristina at that time?

**İskender Muzbeg:** Of course, we mingled with people in Pristina, especially because this was a very important development for *Tan*. In other words, in terms of Turkish culture and within *Tan*, young people came to *Tan* every day, submitted writings, brought news, and we visited the schools. We visited schools to report. The gymnasium of Pristina used to be the Meto Bajraktari school of Pristina, as well as the Vuk Karadžić school, today the Elena Gjika school. In Meto Bajraktari as well as in Vuk Karadžić there were Turkish classes, and we as *Tan* were in close cooperation with both the teachers and the students. We organized literary classes, invited them to *Tan*. In this way, we also became closer with the people of Pristina.

**Anita Susuri:** *What kind of reportages did you do?* [speaks in Albanian]

**İskender Muzbeg:** Since I was working on the culture pages at the time, we mostly reported on education problems, cultural development problems, the condition of factory workers, social development, and we also had a page about women. Müberra Tuna prepared a special page, she always conducted interviews with women on various topics and published them here. Among these cultural pages, there was also a sports page. Safet Rekiç prepared the sports page. In other words, *Tan* was not just a newspaper, it was our culture magazine, our music magazine, we even had a composer doing music compositions at that time, Hüseyin Kazaz whose work still lives on. He also created various songs for children and we tried to help the students in this way by publishing them in *Tan*.

**Anita Susuri:** *Did you write, for example, about Kino Rinia?* [speaks in Albanian]

**İskender Muzbeg:** Yes, there was also some news about Kino Rinia, so, news when the films were coming, but our work was mostly related to the association. Among the reportages that I have done, it was with Azem Shkreli, who was the director of the Regional Theater at that time, National Theatre, with whom we did a reportage. Then we worked with artists, theater artists, and we made reportages with professional theater actors. Be it Albanians or Serbs, of course there was no professional Turkish theater. Sometimes we watched movies at Kino Rinia, but I don't remember any particular reportage.

**Anita Susuri:** What kind of movies did you watch?

**İskender Muzbeg:** At that time there were more films either about the people's liberation war or films coming from the West always with gangsters with something, and in most cases these were American films.

**Anita Susuri:** *Western* [movies]? [speaks in English]

**İskender Muzbeg:** Yes Western from the West. I still remember that time, not when I was in university but I'm going back a little bit. We didn't know English, but there was a text circulating, and in that text you would write a word, two, and send it to the postal address of the artists from those films that would be shown. For example, at that time there was Gary Cooper, Burt Lancaster, who else? We would send them letters, and ask for autographed pictures, ask for autographed pictures. Now I remember one from Elizabeth Taylor and [it arrived] in the mail after a month, [or] two months, we would get their signed pictures at home.

**Anita Susuri:** Really?

**İskender Muzbeg:** Really, it's really interesting. Their signed photographs really [were sent], they didn't even know us, we knew them, but whoever wanted wrote a letter. I am sure that it said that we liked them and we asked them for a picture. I mean, we wrote to them without knowing its content.

**Anita Susuri:** Prishtina was different from Prizren, it was a bit more of a city, wasn't it?

**İskender Muzbeg:** More developed, you mean...

**Anita Susuri:** Was it so? What was it like according to you?

**İskender Muzbeg:** Of course, Pristina was an administrative center, state bodies were also there because at that time, Kosovo was an autonomous province and had state bodies and if we compare it to Prizren, Prishtina was already the capital and all activities were taking place in Pristina. Prizren has been a cultural capital, a center of culture, not a capital, but it breathed as a center of culture. Perhaps the difference may be here.

**Anita Susuri:** *I could say that the 80s [speaks in Albanian], the '80s were more... how to put it... the situation was a little more difficult because the demonstrations began in '81 [speaks in Albanian].* What were these years like for you?

**İskender Muzbeg:** Now, of course, I was not in Pristina then because I graduated from university in 1974 and left Pristina. I came to Prizren. Of course, those political developments were troubling people. There were some very difficult situations, but since I was usually interested in culture, I focused on those issues. Even in Pristina, in Prizren and in other cities, the 80s were turbulent years, they were turbulent years, of course I remember them.

**Anita Susuri:** When you returned to Prizren, what did you do?

**İskender Muzbeg:** Now when I was working in Pristina, at *Tan*, in Prizren... I hadn't finished university yet, a person in Prizren named Refet Kiser told me one day, he said, "Why don't you come to Prizren? You are an only child, your mother and father are here, in Pristina... come to Prizren, I am the director of an enterprise" he said, "come here as a lawyer." I told him that I hadn't finished university yet. "But you [should] come [anyway] because we need [someone]" et cetera. And so I came to Prizren without finishing university, without receiving my diploma.

I started working as a lawyer at the Universal company in Prizren. A year later I moved to the municipality, to the Municipality of Prizren. And in the Municipality of Prizren, at that time, I had also passed the law and the bar exams. I worked as a public lawyer in the Municipality of Prizren. *Public lawyer [speaks in Albanian].* Not of the people, the public lawyer is different. This institution of the public lawyer protects the property of the municipality and represents the municipality in the courts,

protecting the rights of the municipality. I worked in this position for 13 years, so, I worked as a public lawyer.

**Anita Susuri:** *Is there something interesting that happened, any case?* [speaks in Albanian]

**İskender Muzbeg:** Related to my job as a lawyer you mean?

**Anita Susuri:** Yes.

**İskender Muzbeg:** Now, for example, Lumbardhi... Lumbardhi, I remember at that time, when I was working as a lawyer, it was the former owners who wanted to get back Lumbardhi, they were the former owners of these premises and they filed a series of lawsuits, but I don't know exactly how those lawsuits ended. Another reason why they sued the municipality. For example, in Has, Has was without water, there was no water, in order to find water in Has they brought a company from Croatia which had researched [how to get water], researched, but did not find water and since water was not found, they didn't get paid at all. In this case, they sued the municipality and I, as a lawyer, defended the rights of the municipality. I remember we settled it with a deal then. So, the duty of this municipal public lawyer is to protect the municipal property.

**Anita Susuri:** *How did your work continue then?* [speaks in Albanian]

**İskender Muzbeg:** I then went to court. I started working in the courts. I worked at the court for about ten years as a judge. Then after the war, after the 1999 war, my work related to human rights for Natasha Kandić here in Prizren, I worked in human rights for Natasa Kandić<sup>12</sup> at the branch of the Humanitarian Law Center in Prizren. After working there for four years, I also researched the topic of human rights, especially in the villages of Theranda Municipality, we worked on the missing persons in the war. I went to houses and did interviews, got information. Of course, I didn't speak Albanian that well. But after the war, I was received very well in those houses. Even though I didn't speak Albanian that well, they welcomed us very well. They always gave us all the information we needed.

I turned 75 years old. When I go back to the past, of course I remember everything as if it were yesterday, but still many journeys have passed. By the way, I am a poetry enthusiast, I have published my poems in various magazines and newspapers and I have also published them as a book. For example, my first book of poems, *Kaynak*, was published in *Sevinç* publications in 1972 in Skopje. Then the novel *Yanan Sevgiler* [Tur.: Burnt Loves] was published in *Tan* newspaper. Later, in 1974, my book of stories titled *Sevil* was published in *Tan*. And again in 1983, my book of poems was published under the title *E vërteta* [Alb.: The Truth] within the *Birlik* publications in Skopje.

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<sup>12</sup> Natasa Kandić (1946) is a prominent Serbian human rights activist and founder of the Belgrade-based Humanitarian Law Center.

*Taşta Türküler* [Tur.: Songs of stone] was published in *Birlik* publications in 1987, *The sun warms me* was published in *Tan* in Prizren in 1997, and again in *Tan* in 1998 the book of poems titled *Sülo*. *Sülo* is a stylistic figure in my poems, it is used as a type that keeps our existence alive, that gives us courage. He is also my first director at *Tan*, Süleyman Brima. I have also used *Sülo* in the sense of the person who keeps our existence alive. From these books, there was a second edition of my book *Kaynak* published because it is used as a textbook and as an additional text in schools. In the same way, a second edition of the book *Taşta Türküler* was published, since it is taught in schools.

Allow me to tell you again, I like teamwork. Regarding the contribution to education in Kosovo, for example with Bedrettin Koron, we have prepared History books for our schools, History for the fifth grade, History for the sixth grade, and History for the seventh grade. In addition, I work with translation, literary translations, that is, with cultural translations. For example, I have translated Bosnian poetry and Albanian poetry and published them in *Tan* newspaper, in *Cevrem* and *Kuş* magazines here, in *Sesler* magazine in Skopje, and in many other magazines in Turkey.

For example, as part of the translations from Albanian poetry, I have translated the poems of Esad Mekuli, Faik Beqaj, Muhamet Kërveshi, Mirko Gashi, Çerkin Bytyqi, Selahadin Krasniqi and others into Turkish. From Roma poems, [Kujtim Paçaku](#) and I have translated and published poems by five or six other people that I can mention. I have translated both Bosnian and Serbian poetry. So, I also translated from Turkish literature, Turkish literature of Kosovo and samples of poems from Turkish literature that developed in Macedonia from Turkish to Serbian and published them in magazines in various cultural centers of Yugoslavia. Our poems were represented in Serbian and Romani, but also in Italian, within Yugoslavia at that time.

**Anita Susuri:** Alright... what were you up to in the 90s, what were those years like for you?

**İskender Muzbeg:** The 90s were years of oppression, they were years of oppression. I was a judge at the time, but of course there were different judicial procedures. There was a criminal procedure, for those who committed crimes, and at that time there were many such problems, I dealt with inheritance procedures, *inheritance* [speaks in Albanian], in this context, I think I contributed a lot to the fixing of these relationships of our people, namely in the inheritance procedure I made a lot of contribution. For example, someone had died and his property, who are the heirs, we made a decision. For me it was a separate issue, it was one of the subjects of my field.

At that time, a law had been made, the law on the sale of apartments. In the past, companies gave families apartments for use, additional to rent, and in the early 90s a law was passed that whoever uses that apartment has the right to buy it. Well, but I'm saying it was a difficult situation then, for example, the company Perllonka in Prizren allowed Serbs to buy these apartments. An agreement was made in companies that with a little money, you could buy the apartment in which you lived until

then, but those who were not Serbs had a problem, why? Because the same company, let's say, wouldn't sell you the apartment.

And according to the law, they had to appear in court and I handled these [cases] in court. In at least 50 files, I had [made] decisions that these people, whether Albanians or Turks, so not Serbs, had the right to buy the apartments they had used until then. And the company didn't sell it to them, they came to court, and I made a decision, and in the end this decision actually changed the contract, changed the contract and they became the owners of those apartments by court decision. So, in those difficult situations, it was quite difficult to finish these jobs.

The company immediately appealed against my decision. *The appeal* [speaks in Albanian]... and it goes to the highest court and they reject it until it's over, but I've finished at least 50 cases this way. I mean, they were certainly tough years. After that, in the human rights organization that I started working for after the war, I used to interview people and examine things and these issues. So, what rights were violated and how.

**Anita Susuri:** *Was there any other type of pressure, because that was an important decision which you made...* [speaks in Albanian]

**Iskender Muzbeg:** Of course there was... For example, they would tell me, "Let's talk" because there was a higher court on the floor above. I would go, "What is this?" They would say, "What decision did you make?" I said, "I made this decision based on the law, what the article of this law says, if a person is not given permission to buy the apartment, that person comes to court. The court looks at the conditions, looks at the conditions, if they meet the conditions, if there is a contract to use it for rent, if the apartment is given to them, then they meet the conditions" and that's what I told them. But they said, "You know how things are." "I know, but I am a person who follows the law." Of course, that's how I finished these documents, and in the end no one could say anything. Those people, those people are now the owners of those apartments.

**Anita Susuri:** *I wanted to ask earlier, but we diverted from the topic a bit, how did you meet* [speaks in Albanian], how did you meet your wife?

**Iskender Muzbeg:** In the *Shkolla Normale*, in the *Shkolla Normale* I was in the fourth grade, my wife who isn't alive anymore, she was enrolled in the first year [of the *Shkolla Normale*]. We met there, and of course the youth and the way people got to know each other at that time is not the same as now. Now young people live in very different conditions, they meet, get to know each other, of course the first thing was meeting, maybe you wait for months to see if you will meet them and so on. But we got along, I waited for her to finish school, then we got married and in this marriage we... Ah yes, she also worked as a teacher, she worked as a teacher until she died. From our marriage we had three children, two sons and a daughter. Even the children, thanks to Allah, have all completed [university], my eldest

Esin has completed his studies at the Faculty of Communication at the University of Ankara, the younger Beng has also completed his studies at the Faculty of Communication at the University of Ankara too, my daughter Belge studied here and is a teacher, graduated from the Faculty of Education, now works as a teacher. I also have grandchildren, that's how life goes on.

**Anita Susuri:** How did you spend your time during the war, what were those years like for you?

**İskender Muzbeg:** Of course, those were very difficult months, the situation and social-political relations, which began to become difficult in the early 90s, gradually reached their peak, the violence increased, and so the war began. I spent the war time with my family in Prizren, there were many difficulties. It was difficult for everyone, for example we went out early in the morning to buy bread. There was bread delivered, a few bread loaves, and then there was no more bread. In other words, it was also a very difficult psychological situation and the fighting did not take place in Prizren, but there were conflicts around. In the evening we heard gunshots and other noises which instilled a lot of fear, especially among the children. During war, war means chaos, total chaos. The person you knew well until yesterday was now showing their hidden face and you got confused. Does this also happen? But unfortunately there have been such cases. Fortunately, it did not last long, because if it had lasted, the number of deaths would have increased and these traumas would have been greater.

**Anita Susuri:** After the war, you were in Prizren, right?

**İskender Muzbeg:** After the war, in Prizren, Natasa Kandić, through her organization, did research related to the war and I prepared reports by writing about what happened in the war. Then our reports were sent both to the Hague court and to various institutions in Europe through Natasa Kandić's organization, her organization.

**Anita Susuri:** *You did this work until retirement, right?* [speaks in Albanian]

**İskender Muzbeg:** No, four years, four years later the branch of that organization in Prizren closed down and I continued working as a lawyer. While working for Natasa Kandić, she said to me one day, "You have all the conditions to be a lawyer, why don't you register as a lawyer?" I said, "I hadn't thought of that," she said, "You can work as a lawyer in our organization." Because at that time, after the war, several trials were initiated against war criminals. It was in Gjilan, for example, I went to Gjilan, and in Peja, I went as a supervisor, as an observer and prepared reports. So, I remember there was an event about the murders in Gjilan. There was a Serb who had killed two or three people, and there was his file. Even in Peja... Ah, even in Prizren there was a man tried for war crimes, a man from Rausa. So, I used to go to the courts as an observer and write my reports.

**Anita Susuri:** How do you spend your time now?

**İskender Muzbeg:** Now I am retired but I still work as a lawyer, now I work a little as a private lawyer as much as I can. But, my goal, my desire is to better organize this creative work that I have done over the years, prepare my poems from scratch and publish new books. However, as I said earlier, I have grandchildren. I am also dealing with them, that is a special joy.

**Anita Susuri:** *If you would like to add anything else for the end...* [speaks in Albanian].

**İskender Muzbeg:** *No, thank you* [speaks in Albanian].

**Anita Susuri:** *Thanks a lot to you as well...* [speaks in Albanian].